

A NOMINALIST THEORY OF CONTENT

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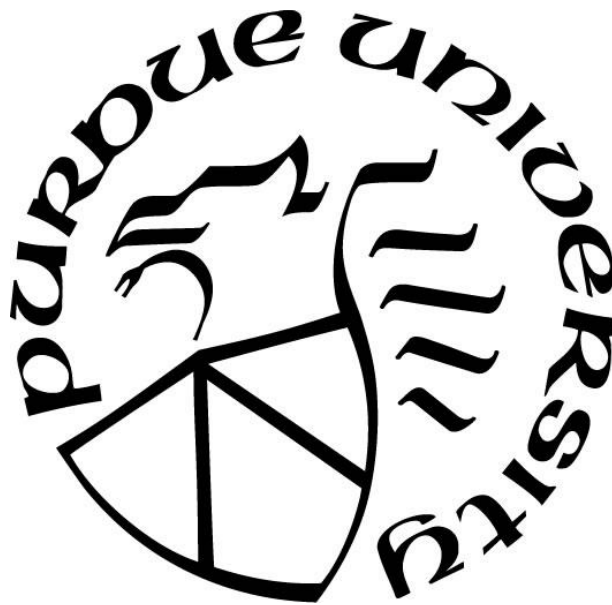
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Dedicated to all those without whose support I would not have made it this far.

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ABSTRACT

Philosophers who affirm the existence of propositions contend that the contents of declarative sentences, beliefs, doubts, and so on are entities (the things picked out by the term “propositions”), and that these entities have truth-values. Unsurprisingly, there’s rampant disagreement among those philosophers about sorts of things are called “propositions”. Propositions have been identified with *sui generis* abstract objects, interpreted facts, properties, and types of cognitive acts (this is not an exhaustive list). Despite this debate, most agree that propositions are *representations* (this is how they come to have truth-values), and that propositions are not to be identified with token mental representations. I agree that propositions are representations, but argue that propositions *are* mental representation tokens. The view I defend has sparse contemporary support, but has an impressive pedigree—ancestral views were widely popular in the late medieval, and early modern periods. In this dissertation I argue at length against contemporary criticisms that this view is still credible.

In chapter one, I defend a mentalist semantics; that is, I argue that linguistic representation is parasitic on mental representation: for a sentence to mean that *p* is for it to express (or be conventionally used to express) the thought that *p*. Once this is established, I argue in chapter two that *mental* representations (as opposed to non-mental ones) are ideal candidates to serve as the contents of sentences and propositional attitudes. I compare my preferred view, that propositions are token mental representations, against rival views (sorted into two groups) and show that a cost benefit analysis of each favors my position. In chapter three, I start exploring what these mental representations might be like. I argue that they’re structured entities whose constituents are modes of presentation of the things represented. I decline to analyze the relation which unites these modes of presentation, but argue (contra some contemporary philosophers) that this relation is not predication. Finally, in chapter four, I argue against the widely popular view that propositions have the things they’re about as constituents. I show that such a view cannot accommodate thoughts about nonexistent entities. I propose that the modes of presentation which are constituents of propositions are *non-descriptive*, but criticize the mental file conception of non-descriptive modes of presentation.

CHAPTER 1. A DEFENSE OF MENTALIST SEMANTICS

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 An Overview

The theory I'll defend in this dissertation is that propositions (the primary truth-bearers, contents of declarative sentences, and objects of attitudes) are *token mental representations*.¹ A *mentalist* semantics is one which analyzes representational properties of linguistic expressions in terms of the representational properties of mental states (Speaks, 2019, section 3.1).² Let “s” pick out an arbitrary, declarative sentence of some language (it doesn't matter which one). The view I'm defending is that, for s to be meaningful—i.e. for s to have content, and to (thereby) represent things as being a certain way—is for s to express a proposition, which is a token mental representation. This view offers an analysis of the meaningfulness of s, and the analysis makes reference to a mental representation. Moreover, suppose s represents things as being such that Cicero is an orator; the view I'm defending is that, for s to represent things as being such that Cicero is an orator is for s to express a proposition, which is a token mental representation of things being such that Cicero is an orator. This view offers an analysis of the representational properties of a linguistic expression in terms of the representational properties of a mental state. Hence, the view I'm defending is a mentalist one.

Throughout this dissertation, I'll be assuming that a *propositional* theory of meaning is true. On such a theory, a (declarative) sentence is meaningful (in the most full-blooded sense) when it has *content*, and the content (a proposition) is an entity in its own right.³ The propositional theory is controversial, but I propose to set that controversy aside, for the following reason: the view I'm

¹ The three roles mentioned in the parenthetical note are some (though not all) of the responsibilities usually assigned (definitionally, it seems) to propositions. These three, I contend, are the *essential* propositional roles, though at least one of them (viz. the *primary truth-bearer*) role is lately being eschewed by philosophers (like Peter Hanks, Jeffrey King, and Scott Soames) seeking a naturalist theory of content. I discuss these propositional roles at length in Chapter 2.

² Here “mental states” should be construed broadly, so that it includes things like *mental representations*, *intentions*, and *beliefs*.

³ I will discuss below (see section 1.5.3) why the qualification that *full-blooded* meaningfulness requires expressing a proposition. Most (if not everyone who thinks propositions exist) would say that a sentence is meaningful iff it expresses a proposition, full stop. As we'll see, I think that the theory I'm defending allows for two ways that a sentence can be meaningful, only one of which requires expressing a proposition.

defending in this dissertation is a particular (and nowadays wildly unpopular) version of the propositional theory; I have plenty of adversaries who nevertheless agree that *some* version of the propositional theory is right,⁴ so taking on the added task of defending this point of agreement multiplies opponents beyond necessity. I'll have my hands full enough defending my view against the (almost) universally held view that propositions (if there are such things) are *abstract* objects—be they *types* of mental representations (Soames, 2014; Hanks, 2015), properties instantiated by everything or nothing (Speaks, 2014b), primitive representations without constituents (Merricks, 2015), or interpreted facts whose constituents include the things they're about (King, 2007, 2014).

Lest my view come off as a non-starter, let me say something in support of the thought that contents are not abstract. The worry is that semantics is ordinarily concerned with the contents of sentence *types* rather than tokens; hence contents (if there are such things, and whatever they are) couldn't be tokens of any type. How could, e.g., a token mental representation serve as the content of a sentence-type? Take the sentence-type "Caesar crossed the Rubicon"; could the content of this abstract object be a token mental representation? If so, which token is its content? A non-arbitrary answer isn't obvious here. Hence one might conclude that propositions aren't—*couldn't be*—token mental representations. (Of course, the problem does not hinge on identifying contents with token *mental representations*; the problem is tied to the presumed token-hood of the content. Hence, contents aren't tokens. But perhaps mental representation *types* could be the contents of sentence types—it's not arbitrary to propose that the content of "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" (the sentence type) is a mental representation type which represents things as being such that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. More generally, whereas a token of something couldn't be the content of a sentence-type, another abstract object (viz. another *type* of thing) could be. Hence, propositions, if there are such things, couldn't be particular—they'd have to be abstract.

Now, it's surely right that *if* we define "content" as the proposition expressed by a sentence-type, then token mental representations couldn't be propositions. But I think there's a good reason to resist this definition. Suppose nominalism is true (as seems at least epistemically possible). Then *there are no* mental representation types. In fact, there aren't abstract objects of *most any* kind (though see fn 6, below). But propositions are standardly considered paradigmatic examples of abstracta (only an abstract object could be the content of a sentence-type).⁵ So, if nominalism is

⁴ Some have even offered general defenses of the view. See Soames (2010) and Speaks (2014a).

⁵ See, e.g., Rosen (2017).

true, then there are no propositions. Even so, sentences *are* meaningful. It follows that, if nominalism is true, then all propositional theories of meaning are false. It seems like a mistake was made somewhere. Consider this: no one wants to deny that sentence *tokens* have content (lest they deny that particular utterances of “Caesar crossed the Rubicon” are meaningful). But now a nominalist must deny that this content is an *entity* (a proposition). But a nominalist shouldn’t be saddled with a claim like this (at least, not simply by her commitment to nominalism). That a token utterance or inscription has an entity as its content is, on its face, neutral with respect to the realism-nominalism debate. So we should, I think, relax the requirement that propositions are *abstract*, and (as we’ve seen) this requires giving up the definition of “content” from the start of this paragraph.⁶

In short, I’m inclined to resist the argument from a couple paragraphs ago because it too easily brings along a heavy ontological burden. It seems to me that *mental representation types* (or types of *anything*, for that matter) might not (or, probably don’t) exist in their own right; the same goes for Fregean senses, or abstract simples (Merricks, 2015, ch. 6), properties instantiated by everything or nothing (Speaks 2014b), etc. Reflection on the phenomenon of sentence-meaning shouldn’t (or, at least, needn’t) shed light on whether there are such things. But the definition of “content”, above, *does* shed light on whether there are such things. So, I reject that definition of “content”.

Call the theory I’m defending (viz. that propositions are token mental representations) the *Lockean* theory of meaning; for my view, which is Lockean in spirit, is that linguistic expressions function as signs of mental representations (Locke called those representations “ideas”), which are the contents of those expressions.⁷ There are (obviously) many challenges to this theory, and these will be addressed in separate chapters. But before considering what the Lockean theory entails about, e.g., (apparently) shared content or belief (chapter 2), direct reference (chapter 3), and de re

⁶ One could argue that I’ve painted an unnecessarily bleak picture of the nominalist’s circumstances here. He might say that nominalists *can* affirm this standard definition of content, viz. by taking the contents of sentence-types to be *sets* (e.g. of mental representations). Sets *are* abstracta, but they’re “safe” abstracta—the kind nominalists are willing to include in their ontology. Maybe so, but (arguably) this is no help to the nominalist here, since propositions aren’t sets: propositions, unlike sets, have their truth-conditions in a non-derivative way. See Merricks (2015, ch. 3).

⁷ Locke (1689/1975), Bk 3, ch.s 1 & 2. Locke is by no means the *only* (nor even the most skilled) philosopher to endorse the theory I’m defending here. He’s but one member of a long tradition in mentalism which (arguably) reaches back to Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* (see section 1.3.1, below), and was the orthodox view in the medieval period. (Ockham is a good example of the latter point, since he explicitly identifies *propositions* with token mental representations; see Brower-Toland, Forthcoming.)

thought (chapter 4) we must focus on a more basic point: is mentalism (of which the Lockean theory is just one variety) *true*? If the answer is “no”, then the Lockean theory is dead in the water. On the other hand, if the answer is “yes”, then the view might have a fighting chance. The goal of this chapter is to defend the “yes” answer to this question.

1.1.2 A Note on Intentionality

There are good (indeed, as you might expect, I think *prevailing*) reasons to believe that mentalism is right. My arguments are largely motivated by a conviction about intentionality that will be a recurring theme in this dissertation; the conviction is that *intentionality* (*viz.* *representational power*) is properly attributed to mental things only. This view is most famously associated with Brentano (who, in turn, attributes it to the Medievals), but it’s enjoyed contemporary support by figures like Laird Addis, Tim Crane, Richard Fumerton, H.P. Grice, Colin McGinn, and John Searle (to name just a few).⁸ Since propositions are supposed to have representational powers properly attributed to them (they’re primary truth-bearers, after all), it follows that *propositions* are mental things. (So goes my train of thought, at least).

But you may not share that conviction, and it is (surprisingly) difficult to motivate. It’s unfortunate that many of the (seemingly) obvious examples of representation aren’t mental at all (pictures, sentences, sculptures, etc.). What’s more, it’s a common (but not universal) naturalist impulse to give an analysis of representational properties which make no appeal to ‘occult’ mental powers.⁹ In chapter 2, part of my case for identifying propositions with token mental representations (as opposed to abstract simples) will be that my view (but not the other) is compatible with naturalism.¹⁰ This apparent tension can be addressed by pointing out that I won’t be advocating for the attribution of *in-principle* occult properties to mental states. It’s perfectly consistent with naturalism that (some) mental states are individuated by their representational powers (so long as a state’s possession of representational powers admits of a naturalist analysis; see Dretske, 1995).

⁸ See Addis (1989), Crane (1998, 2001), Fumerton (2002), Grice (1957, 1968) McGinn (1988), and Searle (1983).

⁹ See Stampe (1977), Dennett (1989), and Wettstein (2004). On the other hand, see McGinn (1988) for a naturalist’s case for attributing (seemingly) occult properties to mental states.

¹⁰ Despite Merricks’ brief suggestion to the contrary; see Merricks (2015), p. 214.

Perhaps naturalists often resist attributing primary representational properties exclusively to mental entities for the following reason: they're convinced that a naturalist analysis of representational properties will invariably permit of non-mental, primary representations as well. Consider the following from Stampe (1977):

Representation is an altogether "natural" relation; there is nothing essentially mentalistic about it; it *may* be a wholly physical relation.... It is the relationship that obtains between the moon and its image reflected on the surface of a pond, and it would do so were no minds ever to have existed. (Stampe, 1977, p. 706)

In short, the conviction widespread among naturalists is that mental representation is but one kind of representation, and (what's more) isn't a *primary* kind of representation, either. If we assume (with Stampe) that reflections in a pond, or rings on a tree-stump are mind-independent representations, then surely we will want to deny that the exclusive bearers of primary representational properties are mental states (and we'd want to say this regardless of our stance with respect to the naturalism/non-naturalism debate). But it's not obvious to me that reflections in a pond, or rings on a tree-stump are mind-independent representations; so, it's not obvious to me (just from those examples) that we should attribute primary representational properties to non-mental things.

But suppose I'm wrong about this—suppose that, with respect to representational properties, pride of place doesn't go (just) to mental states. Even so, it would not follow that *propositions* (the primary representations with which I'm concerned in this dissertation) could be non-mental entities. Propositions must be those primary representations to which we relate whenever we entertain a thought or have a belief. But (it seems to me) in any such case the best candidate for being that relatum is *a representational mental state*, tokening of which constitutes entertaining the thought. (I discuss this in more detail in section 2.2.2.) If that's right, then propositions are (token) mental representations, even if they're not *the only* primary truth-bearers (and this would be because they're the only primary truth-bearers *which are also the objects of attitudes*).

On the other hand, here's a (brief) case for thinking that representational properties should be primarily attributed only to mental entities. It seems that representations are things which have the function (/purpose) of conveying information: To see why, suppose that was not the case. Suppose,

for instance, that Dennis Stampe is right, and that something, *x*, is a representation of *y*, iff the following obtains:

x has a set of properties *F*, *y* has a set of properties *G*, and if *y* didn't have *G*, then *x* wouldn't have *F*.¹¹

(Stampe's view is that the relation captured here is a *causal relation*, viz. *x*'s having *F* is *caused by y's having G*.) These conditions recognize reflections and tree-rings as (mind-independent) representations; unfortunately, they're too broad. After all, if Stampe is right, then the mold on an assembly line is represented by all the parts that come off the line, and *someone's body being covered with distinctive spots* represents him as having chickenpox.¹² But it seems obvious that *being covered in spots* doesn't represent having chickenpox, and that a part off an assembly line doesn't represent the mold that was used to give it its (distinctive) form. I contend that this is because *being covered in spots* doesn't have the intrinsic function (/purpose) of indicating that someone has chickenpox, and that a part off the assembly line doesn't have the intrinsic function of indicating (i.e. sharing information about) the mold. The same goes for reflections on the surface of a pond, or rings on a tree-stump.

Of course, this is not to say that those (non-mental) things *couldn't* represent; but for tree rings, reflections, or parts off an assembly line to represent something (i.e. for them to get the purpose of conveying information), they must be used (i.e. interpreted) a certain way. However, to interpret tree rings, reflections, etc. a certain way, we must be thinking of them a certain way, and this can't be done without the use of mental states with their own representational properties. The same goes,

¹¹ See Stampe (1977) p. 704.

¹² More drastically, suppose determinism is true: then *the way things are at t_n* is a representation of the *the way things are at t_{n-1} , t_{n-2} , t_{n-3}* , etc. Compare this to Fumerton's objection to causal theory of reference in Fumerton (2002): What is it that determines which of indefinitely many items in the causal chain leading to my use of a symbol is the referent of that symbol? ... If we answer the question ... by appealing to a "baptismal" ceremony that involves an act of singling out an object through an intentional state, where the intentionality of that state is not given a causal analysis, then our search for an understanding of how one thing represents another is clearly not to be completed through a naturalistic analysis. If we try to give a causal account of the original "baptism" of an object, we encounter again the problem that there are indefinitely many links in the causal chain leading to indefinitely many changes in a subject. And we need some account of how it comes to be that something occurring in the subject is a representation of one but not other links in the causal chain leading to that state" (p. 45). The determinist objection shares some similarities to the second horn of the dilemma; even if we were to grant that one state of the world represents a previous state, we wouldn't have a principled way of discerning which state it represents. Of course, I say it's absurd to hold that one state of the world represents a previous one at all.

I say, for all instances of non-mental representation; so, all non-mental representation is parasitic on mental representation.¹³ All this, to be sure, is much too quick to convince someone remotely skeptical of my conclusion; but a more convincing argument is beyond the scope of this project. What I've captured here is snapshot of a train of thought which leads naturally to the view that propositions (if there are such things) are mental entities. As I've pointed out a couple paragraphs earlier, it's not the only train of thought which leads to that view.

The rest of the chapter follows this outline. In section 1.2 I introduce some important distinctions which help situate the main issues in this chapter. There I distinguish between *semantic* and *foundational* theories of meaning, and then between *weak* and *strong* mentalism. In section 1.3 I present two *prima facie* cases for mentalism; section 1.4 contains two *prima facie* cases against mentalism. In section 1.5, I articulate a version of weak mentalism (viz. expressionist mentalism) which can address those cases from section 1.4. Finally, I show how expressionist mentalism addresses those cases in section 1.6.

1.2 Two Distinctions

1.2.1 Mentalism and Non-Mentalism

It's a truism that sentences represent, and no less that *minds* represent. While it could be that these two points are independent of one another, that seems unlikely. Consider that a string of marks or sounds which looks or sounds like "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" doesn't intrinsically represent things as being such that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. (Suppose, by some freak coincidence, an army of ants traced out a path in the dirt that looks like "Caesar crossed the Rubicon";¹⁴ or suppose that a computer arbitrarily produces a string of sounds which resemble what we hear when someone says, "Caesar crossed the Rubicon". In neither case should we say that it was *said that* Caesar crossed the Rubicon, since intuitively neither represents things as being such that Caesar crossed the Rubicon.) Or, consider that there are some representational mental states (e.g.

¹³ See Dretske (1995) ch. 3 for a lengthy defense of this view. I'm inclined to think that Dretske's conclusion (that only, albeit not all, mental things have intrinsic representational functions) is correct. It's worth noting that Dretske purports to give a *naturalist-friendly* argument for this conclusion.

¹⁴ cf. Putnam's example of (and discussion about) an ant accidentally tracing out a 'picture' of Winston Churchill (or even what looks like the words "Winston Churchill") in the sand (Putnam, 1981, pp. 1-2). The upshot of these illustrations is, according to Putnam, that "what is [mainly] necessary for representation, is *intention*" (p. 2).

particular beliefs) which only seem possible if the subject has a language ‘in which’ to think (such as the belief that propositions are token mental representations). Both examples suggest that mental and linguistic representation are somehow related to one another—namely, that one is *dependent* on the other. On first blush, the first examples suggest that linguistic representation is dependent on mental representation, and the second suggests the reverse. It’s very natural to say, with respect to the first example: “Caesar crossed the Rubicon” represents things as being a certain way *because* minds think about those marks a certain way, and thinking employs mental representations (e.g. perhaps of Caesar, the Rubicon, the act of crossing, etc.).¹⁵ Likewise, it’s very natural to say, in light of the second example: some representational mental states are only possible *because* sentences already have representational properties.

The dominant view (and the one which I hold) says that the linguistic representation ‘depends upon’ mental representation. A little more precisely: the view says that linguistic representation is analyzed in terms of mental representation. This, again, is the mentalist view to which you’ve already been introduced. The rival to mentalism *is not* that the dependence (/analysis) relation runs in the opposite direction (viz. from mental representation to linguistic representation); rather, the rival is just that mentalism is false. Call this view “Non-Mentalism”. The view that mental representation ‘depends on’ (/is analyzed in terms of) linguistic representation is a variant of non-mentalism, which I propose to ignore in this chapter. For proponents of that view, see Speaks (2003), Wettstein (2004), and—arguably—Wittgenstein (1953/2009). Hence, I propose to define “Mentalism” and “Non-Mentalism” as follows:

MENTALISM	Mental representation is logically prior to linguistic representation (i.e. sentential representation is <i>correctly analyzed</i> in terms of mental representation).
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NON-MENTALISM	Mentalism is false.
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Besides the communitarian version of non-mentalism endorsed in Speaks (2003) and Wettstein (2004), there’s a version which assigns semantic contents through causal relations (Kripke, 1972;

¹⁵ Putnam again (after concluding that intention is necessary for representation): “to have the intention that *anything* ... should *represent* Churchill, I must have been able to *think about* Churchill in the first place” (Ibid., p. 2).

Putnam, 1973, 1975, 1981; and Devitt, 1981).¹⁶ Yet another version assigns content via certain social norms (Brandom, 1994). Likewise, there are different versions of mentalism. One analyzes linguistic representation in terms of speaker intentions (Grice, 1957), another in terms of beliefs, and still another in terms of mental representations (Ockham).

1.2.2 Strong and Weak Mentalism

Suppose we grant that mentalism is true; even so, we may wonder whether a linguistic expression's having content is properly analyzed in terms of the representational properties of some *actual* mental state, or merely in terms of the representational properties of some *possible* mental state. If we opt for the first analysis, then we're opting for a version of strong mentalism; if we opt for the second, then we're option for a version of weak mentalism. Take my view that propositions are token mental representations, which (can be) expressed by particular linguistic entities. A strong mentalist version of this view would say that a particular utterance, *s*, has content iff it expresses an (actual) mental representation token. A weak mentalist version would say that *s* has content iff it expresses a possible token mental representation¹⁷:

Strong Mentalism

s means (in *L*) that *p* \leftrightarrow *s*'s representational properties in virtue of which it represents things as being such that *p* are (and can only be) properly analyzed in terms of the representational properties of actual mental states

Weak Mentalism

s means (in *L*) that *p* \leftrightarrow *s*'s representational properties in virtue of which it represents things as being such that *p* are (/can be) properly analyzed in terms of the representational properties of a possible mental state.

¹⁶ Though Wettstein alleges that views like Kripke's really should be categorized as a version of mentalism. But Wettstein's justification for this allegation is difficult to appreciate—his thought is that, given Kripke's contention that “what sets up the name as a name for the item in question ... is a description ... the tie between name and named is more intellectual than it might appear” (Wettstein, 2004, pp. 81-2). At this point, I'm not interested in Kripke exegesis, so I'm content to flag this point and then set it aside.

¹⁷ Emma Borg carves roughly the distinction between weak and strong Intention-Based Semantics: “according to the [weak version of Intention-Based Semantics], the crucial intentions concern conventional use and are thus independent of the intentional states of a current speaker. While, according to the [strong] position..., the crucial intentions include those belonging to the current speaker. (Borg, 2006)

The Lockean theory (as we've already seen) is compatible (in principle) with either version of mentalism. However, there is a strong *prima facie* case for opting to couple it with strong mentalism. Assume (for reductio) that a sentence token, *s*, expresses a merely possible mental representation token, *p*. Then *s* has *p* as its content. But *p*, because it's a *merely* possible token, does not exist (lest we include mere *possibilia* in our ontology).¹⁸ So, *s* has *p* as its content, but there is no *p*. This seems absurd: if there is no *p*, then *s* can't have *p* as its content (i.e. *s* can't have as its content something which does not exist). So, we should reject the reductio assumption, and conclude that *s* *doesn't* express a merely possible token mental representation.

But strong mentalism (at least, when coupled with the Lockean theory) seems to me untenable, for it leads to absurd consequences for too many (and too easily manufactured) scenarios. What are we to say for instance, about inscriptions in a long-forgotten language? If I merely misspeak, and utter, "Cicero was a famous Greek orator", how can we make sense of the fact that (intuitively) I've just said something false? On the other hand, if I blurt out a sentence without thinking (and, let's stipulate, while I'm by myself), how can we make sense of the fact that the sentence is meaningful? Strong mentalism (or, the Lockean variant thereof) delivers all the wrong answers here. So, I reject strong mentalism, and couple the Lockean theory with the weak version instead. How to do this while escaping the reductio argument above (and without losing any naturalist allies along the way) is the focus of section 1.5.3.

1.3 Two Cases for Mentalism

1.3.1 The Historical Case for Mentalism

The view I'm calling the "Lockean" theory of meaning reaches back much further than Locke. In *De Interpretatione* Aristotle says that words are "symbols" of "affections in the soul", and that those affections are "likenesses of...actual things" (16^a4-8). What seems to fall out of this is that

¹⁸ One is, of course, free to abandon this premise if s/he likes, but I'm not (given my attempt to remain neutral on the naturalism/non-naturalism debate). At any rate, I'm inclined to agree with the lesson behind the following remark in Fumerton (2002): "[t]he thought that there are thoughts is not a necessary truth because the fact that there are thoughts is not present in all possible worlds. But here one really must worry about taking too seriously the metaphor of possible worlds. While one might permissibly allow oneself the use of metaphors as a heuristic device, one must always be prepared to eliminate it in a fuller, more illuminating analysis of modality. *There is only one world and all truths are made true by facts that are constituents of that one world*" (p. 51, emphasis added).

words refer to (or, *represent*) things in an indirect, or derivative way: “Aristotle” refers to Aristotle only by signifying an affection in the soul that is a likeness of Aristotle. If we extend the story to cover other parts of speech (and, as far as I know, Aristotle doesn’t give us a reason not to), then it starts to look like a story according to which *whole sentences* represent things in an indirect way: sentences represent states of affairs by signifying complex affections in the soul that are likenesses of those states of affairs. If this is, roughly, what Aristotle thought (ignoring the anachronistic depiction), then he believed that mentalism is true (since he thought that that sentential representation should be analyzed in terms of mental representation).¹⁹

Augustine seemed, at one point, to agree that linguistic representation works roughly in the way described by Aristotle. Consider the following passage from early in the *Confessions*:

I myself, when I was unable to communicate all I wished to say to whomever I wished by means of whimpering and grunts (which I used to reinforce my demands), ... repeated the sounds already stored in my memory by the mind which you, my God, had given me. When [my elders] called something by name and pointed it out while they spoke, I saw it and realized that the thing they wished to indicate was called by the name they uttered. And what was meant was made plain by the gestures of their bodies, by a kind of natural language ... which ... indicate[s] a disposition and attitude.... So it was that ... I gradually identified the objects which the words stood for and, having formed my mouth to repeat these signs, I was thereby able to express my will. Thus I exchanged with those about me the verbal signs by which we express our wishes. (I.8.13)

The picture which suggests itself here is one according to which we have wishes, desires, and thoughts that are (in some sense) language-independent, and the function of linguistic expressions is (primarily) to communicate those wishes, desires, and thoughts to other rational beings.

Replace “affections in the soul” in the Aristotelian story with “token mental sentences”, and you have the standard medieval view about the contents of sentences.^{20,21} The representational

¹⁹ While this expressionist interpretation of Aristotle is the standard one, it’s not uncontroversial. Phillip Cary cites a growing body of literature (and argues in his own right) that the standard interpretation is mistaken, and that expressionist semantics actually begins with Augustine. (See Cary, 2008, esp. chapters 1 and 3). Here is not the place to scrutinize the dispute. If the standard interpretation of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* is wrong, then the historical case for Mentalism should be adjusted accordingly.

²⁰ See Brower-Toland (Forthcoming) on this point, and for a discussion of how this Medieval view developed out of the combined influence of Aristotle, Augustine, and Boethius.

²¹ Trenton Merricks acknowledges in a footnote that “virtually everyone before the nineteenth century” (save the Stoics) believed that representational properties are primarily attributed to *thinkers* alone (Merricks, 2015, p.207).

power of written or spoken sentences is ultimately explained by the representational power of *mental* sentences. So “dogs bark” represents things as being such that dogs bark by signifying a mental sentence which represents things that way.²²

So, when Locke says in Bk III of his *Essay* that words and sentences are expressions of (complexes of) ideas in the mind, and that the function of language is to *communicate* those ideas to one another by signifying them, he was putting forward neither an unprecedented nor unpopular theory about the relationship between sentential and mental representation. He was, rather, presenting the orthodox view that the latter kind of representation explains the former—that linguistic representation should be analyzed partly in terms of mental representations.

This may smack of an appeal to authority, and surely it *would* (as it stands) be appeal to authority *were* the intent of this brief, selective survey to prove that mentalism is true. But that’s not the upshot of this case—Aristotle, Augustine, the Medievals, and Locke might all have been wrong. The real upshot is that their endorsement of mentalism gives us a good reason to take the view seriously. The consensus of many venerable thinkers counts for *something* (even if it doesn’t *entail* that a proposition about which they agree is true).

1.3.2 The Intuitive Case for Mentalism

Like the historical case, the intuitive one does not comprise an argument for mentalism. Instead, it draws out the attractiveness (i.e. intuitive appeal) of mentalism. I’ve broken the case into five (in principle standalone) ‘parts’:

1. In the *Confessions* passage above, Augustine claims there were things he ‘wished to say’ prior to acquiring a language. This at least suggests that, on Augustine’s view (at the time), it’s possible to want to assert things without knowing a language. If *wanting to assert something* requires entertaining a thought, then it seems that Augustine’s view might’ve been that we can entertain thoughts without a language. But (in my estimation) it’s not *intuitive* that we could have beliefs without a language. Even so, Augustine’s point suggests the following intuitive case for mentalism:

²² In fact, Ockham—an exemplar of the Medieval position on this point—went so far as to assign to (token) mental sentences the three main propositional roles mentioned in the opening sentence of this chapter (Brower-Toland, Forthcoming).

There's no question that minds represent (i.e. that some mental states exhibit directedness). I take perceptions to be mental things, and it's hard to deny that perceptions are *representational* (this seems analytic). More importantly, it doesn't seem contingent that these mental states are representational (even if it *is* contingent *what* they represent): at least some mental states are *essentially* representational.²³ Contrast this with words and sentences (inscriptions or utterances) which, though they represent, seem to do so only contingently. (The inscription "cat" might not have referred to anything, and the sound we make on uttering "cat" might not have referred to anything either.) So, something else must explain how a linguistic expression gets its content, and the following criterion readily suggests itself: expressions represent by being *interpreted* a certain way (indeed, it might strike us that any non-mental thing can represent only by being interpreted). Of course, to interpret something, we must be thinking about it a certain way (and thinking seems to involve mental states with essentially representational properties. Hence, non-mental (including *linguistic*) representation is dependent on mental representation. (Recall my brief argument near the close of section 1.1.2.) We can sum up the first piece of the intuitive case like this: there is no linguistic representation without interpretation, and there is no interpretation without mental representation; so there is no linguistic representation without mental representation.

2. Here's another piece of the intuitive case for Mentalism. Suppose a student says to you: "I'm a moral relativist", but further discussion reveals that the student merely believes that there's moral *disagreement* between groups—he does *not* believe that, e.g., the right-making feature of an action is its conformity to a group's social norms.²⁴ It seems natural for the student to say something like this: "what I meant was that I think there's moral disagreement between groups". On one straightforward interpretation of this sentence, the *meaning* (i.e. the *content*) of the student's "I'm a moral relativist" is what the student was actually thinking (and trying to express) when he made that utterance. By uttering "I'm a moral relativist" he meant to express the thought *I'm someone who thinks there's moral disagreement between groups*; hence, that thought is the content of his utterance.

²³ Most follow Searle (1983) in denying that *all* mental states are (essentially) representational. A feeling of pain or anxiety need not be about anything. For arguments purporting to show that all mental states are essentially representational (i.e. that all mental states exhibit about-ness) see Crane (1998).

²⁴ This is but one way to understand moral relativism; Shafer-Landau attributes it to Blackburn and Timmons. See Shafer-Landau (2003, p.32).

One might object that it seems just as natural for the student to say this instead: “I guess I was wrong—I’m not a moral relativist after all; I didn’t realize what I was saying earlier.” Surely a strong mentalist would find this puzzling: it seems to suggest that an utterance can have content *p* even if the speaker isn’t enjoying a mental state with content *p*. There are two responses to this objection. First, it only tells against strong mentalism, whereas this example is pitched as part of an intuitive case for mentalism in general. Second, there are some good reasons to favor the student’s first reply, and to paraphrase away the second.

In assertively uttering “I’m a moral relativist”, the student ascribed a belief to himself. But if asked later *which* belief the student self-ascribed, I think we’d be inclined to say he only ascribed to himself the belief *that there’s moral disagreement across groups*. We might add that he called this position “moral relativism”, but the mistake we’d attribute to him is not about *what* he believed, but rather about *what term he used* to pick out the claim that there’s moral disagreement across groups. What’s more, we shouldn’t say the student was mistaken about what he believed. Suppose the student knew exactly what it was that he believed, and he meant for his use of “moral relativism” to pick out that claim about disagreement. Then “moral relativism” couldn’t, in the context of that utterance, pick out a different view without entailing that the student ascribed to himself the wrong belief. But this seems implausible, since (we’re assuming) the student knew exactly what it was that he believed.

Even so, one may push back that there’s an obvious sense in which the student has used the term “moral relativist”, and this does not paint the mentalist view in a good light. After all, if linguistic representation is parasitic on mental representation, whence comes the student’s error? To be sure (and as we’ll see in section 1.6) it’s easy for weak mentalists to explain the error, but that’s beside the point—this example is supposed to highlight the *intuitive* appeal of mentalism. I concede that this is true, but deny that it undermines this part of the intuitive case. For even if it’s true that there’s some sense in which the meaning of a sentence *doesn’t* seem to be determined by a speaker’s mental states, there’s still the sense highlighted here in which sentence meaning *is* so determined (viz. the sense in which the student really did mean by “I’m a moral relativist” that he thinks there’s moral disagreement across groups). If mentalists struggle with the first sense of ‘meaning’, then non-mentalists struggle with the second one.

3. Here’s another part of the intuitive case for mentalism. It sometimes happens that two parties, after a prolonged argument, realize that they never disagreed with each other after all, i.e. that they

were “talking past each other” the whole time. Let “A” and “B” refer to those parties. It seems intuitive to say: when A uttered *s*, B took her to mean *p*, when in fact A meant *q*. It’s not merely that A *intended* to assert *q* by uttering *s*; rather, *q* is what A asserted (by uttering *s*) all along. Moreover, the fact that *q* is what A had in mind by uttering *s* seems to be that which explains why *s* meant *q*. This is precisely what mentalism predicts.

4. We can find further examples which are suggestive of mentalism. Suppose I say to you, “the man with the martini looks angry”, intending to pick out someone who, in fact, is drinking water (this example is adapted from one in Donnellan, 1966). Intuitively, I’ve referred to that person to whom I’d *intended* to refer (this is the intuition that the distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions is supposed to capture). But if I’ve succeeded in referring to that man, then it’s hard to see what else besides my mental states (e.g. intentions, or mental representations) could explain *how* I succeeded. A similar example is one where I remark, after watching Jack and Jill across the field, and thinking Jack is Jill’s husband, “her husband is kind to her”. If you know that Jack isn’t her husband, you might say, “he is, but he’s not her husband.” Again, I’ve used the description “her husband” referentially to pick out Jones, though Jones isn’t her husband. Again, it’s not clear what else besides my mental states (intentions, or mental representations) could explain how I pulled this off.

5. The final example is adapted from one in McKinsey (2011). Suppose I overhear some people referring to another person with the name “Mr. N”, and I am under the impression that “Mr. N” refers to a passing faculty member. Later that day, I write in my journal, “when I bumped into Mr. N today, I learned that he’s a very stern person”. It seems I’ve thereby referred (by my use of “Mr. N”) to that stern member of faculty that I’d bumped into, even if (as it turns out) that man’s name isn’t “Mr. N”. (Suppose my impression that “Mr. N” referred to the passing faculty member was mistaken.) The intuition/seeming that I’ve referred to that faculty member by “Mr. N” makes perfect sense on a mentalist theory.

1.4 Two Cases for Non-Mentalism

So much for the two (*prima facie*) cases for mentalism. I turn now to the cases for non-mentalism, which I categorize as either *theoretical* or *intuitive*. Both types of cases are supposed to work by showing that mentalism is fatally flawed. Since the mentalism/non-mentalism distinction is exhaustive, the failure of the former would demonstrate the truth of the latter.

1.4.1 The Theoretical Case

1. Grice's version of mentalism is by far the most popular. On his view, *sentence meaning* is properly analyzed in terms of *speaker meaning*, which in turn gets analyzed in terms of speaker intentions. The fact that sentential representation is explained by the intentions of minded things is what makes this a version of mentalism. A second version analyzes sentence meaning in terms of the beliefs someone would have were she to accept the sentence in question. Showing that neither version of mentalism could be right casts serious doubt on mentalism in general.

In his (1957) Grice first articulated his intention-based analysis of non-natural meaning (in Grice (1968), p. 225 we see that this is *speaker-meaning*). He says that someone means_{SNN} (hereafter *speaker-means*) that p iff she intends that *i*) her audience come to believe p, *ii*) they recognize her intention in (*i*), and *iii*) they come to believe p on the basis of the recognition in (*ii*).²⁵ The problem is this: we can come up with cases where someone fails to speaker-mean that p, even though she satisfied all three criteria. Worse still, we can come up with cases where (intuitively) someone speaker-means that p, even though she fails to satisfy some (even *all*) of these criteria. So, (*i*) – (*iii*) are neither necessary nor sufficient to secure speaker-meaning.

Imagine Smith's boss asks him whether he's currently looking for another job, and Smith *is* looking for another job. Not wanting his boss to know this, Smith says, "No, I'm not currently looking." Smith doesn't want to be dishonest, and he chose to make *this* utterance because it's true: he's not *currently* looking for a job; currently he's talking to his boss (though he was looking earlier in the day). It seems to me that Smith speaker-means only q: *I am not, at this moment, looking for another job*.²⁶ Nevertheless, Smith obviously intends for his boss to believe p: *I [Smith] am not looking for another job (full stop)*. He also intends for his boss to recognize this intention (or, at least, we can build this into the example). Finally, Smith intends for his boss to believe p on the basis of this recognition (this too can be built into the example, if needed). So, Smith, in uttering "No, I'm not currently looking", satisfies (*i*) – (*iii*). Yet Smith doesn't speaker-mean p—he only speaker-means q. Hence, (*i*) – (*iii*) aren't sufficient for speaker-meaning that p.

²⁵ These three conditions are supposed to help explain why, e.g., a *photograph* (or showing someone a photograph) of a state-of-affairs doesn't have speaker-meaning, but a *sketch* (or drawing someone a sketch) of a state of affairs *does* have "speaker"-meaning (Grice, 1957, pp. 382-3).

²⁶ We can fill out the example so that this is clearer. We could add that, *if* Smith's boss were to press him to clarify what he meant by this, Smith would fess up that he only meant he's not *at that very moment* looking for another job.

Now imagine that Smith doesn't want his boss to know that he's looking for another job, but is very confident his boss won't believe him if he tells the truth. Not wanting to be even remotely deceptive, Smith says, "yes, I am looking." Again, Smith doesn't intend for his boss to believe p : *I [Smith] am looking for another job*; so Smith, in making this utterance, doesn't satisfy (i). Arguably, he doesn't satisfy (ii) either: if he doesn't intend for his boss to come to believe p , then he can't intend for his boss to recognize that intention—there *is no* intention to recognize! In that case, Smith can't intend for his boss to come to believe p on the basis of such a recognition either. This means condition (iii) isn't satisfied. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Smith speaker-means p . Hence, none of the conditions (i) – (iii) are necessary for Smith to speaker-mean that p .

The three conditions can't be salvaged by replacing *belief* with some other propositional attitude (like, e.g., *entertaining*), as if the problem here is just that belief is too strong a requirement for speaker-meaning. Whatever propositional attitude you substitute for *belief*, the following problem remains. Let "R" pick out a propositional attitude. It's part of the Gricean criteria for speaker-meaning that p that the speaker intends her audience to stand in R to p . Suppose p is a conjunctive or disjunctive proposition, formed by combining q and r (so that p is either $\langle q \ \& \ r \rangle$, or $\langle q \ \vee \ r \rangle$). In that case, someone stands in R to p by standing in R to q and r (e.g., to entertain p , someone must entertain q and r). So, a speaker who intends her audience to R p also intends her audience to R p and q , respectively. But then, by making her utterance, she speaker-means p , q , and r . This seems wrong; for consider Speaks' example of the proposition expressed by "Either 'John' is your friend's name, or I am mistaken".²⁷ Call this proposition "P". To entertain P, you must entertain both of its disjuncts—viz. the proposition expressed by "'John' is your friend's name", and the one expressed by "I am mistaken". So, if I'm to intend by my utterance that you entertain P, I must also intend that you entertain the proposition expressed by "I am mistaken". Likewise, if I intend that you recognize my intention that you entertain P, I must also intend that you recognize my intention that you entertain the proposition expressed by "I am mistaken"; finally, if I intend that you entertain P on the basis of recognizing that intention of mine, then I also intend that you entertain the proposition expressed by "I am mistaken" on the basis of that intention. But then we have the unfortunate result that, by uttering "Either 'John' is your friend's name, or I am mistaken", I speaker-mean that I am mistaken (I satisfy all three criteria for speaker-

²⁷ Speaks (2003), p. 26.

meaning that I'm mistaken). But, of course, I *don't* speaker-mean that I'm mistaken when I make that utterance.²⁸

2. The lesson of these examples, I take it, is that speaker-meaning (and, therefore, *sentence* meaning) shouldn't be analyzed in terms of intended propositional attitude states of an audience. In some cases (e.g., of talking to yourself, or thinking out loud by yourself) there *is no* audience.²⁹ The second version of Mentalism eschews speaker-meaning in its analysis of sentence-meaning, and instead analyzes sentence-meaning in the following way (where ' \supset ' signifies a counterfactual conditional):

s means that p (in a population G) \leftrightarrow For any a: if a is a member of G, then (a accepts s \supset a believes p)³⁰

The criticism of this view in Speaks (2003) seems to me to settle the matter. Surely there are some nearby counterfactuals scenarios in which a accepts s without believing p. There's a nearby world where I accept " $0 + 1 = 3$ " without believing the proposition $\langle 0 + 1 = 3 \rangle$; viz. a world in which "0" and "1" are the names for one and two, respectively. In order for " $0 + 1 = 3$ " to mean $\langle 0 + 1 = 3 \rangle$ (in English), we must have a way of ruling worlds like that out of the scope of the counterfactual conditional. It's tempting to say that the counterfactual conditional only counts worlds in which a population speaks *English*. But this solution is question-begging, since it requires that we first identifying those worlds in which " $0 + 1 = 3$ " means $\langle 0 + 1 = 3 \rangle$ in order to see which worlds fall within the scope of the counterfactual conditional.

Suppose there's some satisfactory response to the above objection. Here's another reason to reject this version of mentalism anyway. It seems to me that Descartes was right when he claimed that $\langle I \text{ exist} \rangle$ is indubitable. In that case, "I do not exist" (when properly understood) can't be

²⁸ This argument comes from Speaks (2003), p. 26. There, it's used to criticize the attempt to salvage the Gricean criteria by replacing *belief* with *entertaining*. But he does not speak to the fact that this criticism cuts against *any* propositional attitude relation you put in the belief spot.

²⁹ Aren't *I* the audience when I talk to myself? Perhaps, but this would not address the objection from the previous paragraph. What's more, it's not clear I can coherently satisfy (i) – (iii) if I'm talking to myself. I can't plausibly intend that I come to R p by recognizing my own intention that I come to R p. Most obviously, if R is the *entertaining* relation, then I'd have to be already entertaining p in order to have this intention.

³⁰ This comes from Speaks (2003), p. 44.

believed.³¹ Suppose it really is impossible for someone to accept “I do not exist”. Then the counterfactual conditional has a necessarily false antecedent. So, it trivially follows that “I do not exist” means \langle I do not exist \rangle ; but it also trivially follows that it means \langle I exist \rangle , $\langle 0 + 1 = 3 \rangle$, \langle the moon is made of cheese \rangle , etc. But, of course, “I do not exist” only means \langle I do not exist \rangle . So, this version of mentalism renders unbelievable sentences semantically ambiguous.

3. Finally, consider Howard Wettstein’s undermining objection to the mentalist project (note his objection is focused on the phenomenon of *reference* as opposed to sentence meaning). Wettstein’s objection begins with a (Wittgensteinian) counter-proposal: in answer to the question, “how is it possible for ‘Aristotle’ to refer to Aristotle?” we should say, ‘Aristotle’ is used a certain way, viz. to stand for Aristotle. As Wettstein admits, this is no explanation at all (pointing out that ‘Aristotle’ is used to stand for/pick out Aristotle doesn’t help much toward understanding *how* ‘Aristotle’ refers to Aristotle). The mentalist has the advantage of proposing something that at least *looks* like an explanation: ‘Aristotle’ refers in virtue of inheriting some representational properties from language users’ mental states. But, says Wettstein, that advantage is illusory:

The [mentalist] proposal has only the form of an explanation.... It would represent a genuine explanatory advance if we understood its key ingredient, the intrinsic intentionality of the representations. But how exactly are representations significant; how do they stand for things? Why isn’t this as problematic as the aboutness of words...? The [mentalist] explanation, unless further developed, seems like positing a god to explain how it all got here but having little helpful to say about what sort of being is this god, about how the god pulled off this “creation”, and about how god himself got here (or about why that’s no problem). (Wettstein, 2004, pp. 105-6)

The upshot, I take it, is this: the mentalist creates for herself a new problem, viz. that of explaining how mental states get their intrinsic representational properties. But then she’s no better off (nay, perhaps worse off) than she was when her problem was still the referential properties of words. The Wittgensteinian proposal (which Wettstein endorses) is to decline added complexity, and to invoke a primitive the notion of *use* instead:

³¹ This argument only works if some propositions are essentially indexical—e.g. if the proposition I express on exclaiming “I am making a mess” must be different from the one you express by saying, “Vince is making a mess”. See Perry (1979). Unsurprisingly, this is controversial. Some think propositions appear under “guises” (e.g., Salmon, 1986, ch. 8), and indexicality is part of a proposition’s disguise, rather than an ineliminable part of the proposition itself.

To say that that there is nothing more to tell [than that, e.g., there's a general practice of using 'Aristotle' to pick out Aristotle] is to join forces with Wittgenstein. For it is to say that there is no further explanatory space, no genuine additional question to be answered. Intelligibility in this context, the kind that philosophy can provide, is a matter of describing our name using practice and of explaining, really describing again, how this particular name comes to fit in. (Ibid. p. 110)

It's not hard to see that Wettstein's objection has far reaching implications (the spirit of the objection cuts against propositional theories of meaning in general).³² But set that to the side: the claim here is that we're just as well off (if not better off) forgoing the mentalist interpretation of reference, and opting to answer questions about reference with claims about language use, full stop. This objection, of course, isn't limited to reference: the same concern applies to sentence meaning in general. If it's sound, then we've lost a (the?) major theoretical motivation for tying mental states to sentence meaning.

1.4.2 The Intuitive Case

1. Recall that, in *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke leveraged his Gödel-Schmidt and Feynman illustrations as counterexamples to the Descriptivist theory of names. In the former illustration, the referent isn't secured by uniquely satisfying a description (which expresses the content of a use of a name) because *someone else* uniquely satisfies that description. In the latter illustration, the referent isn't secured by uniquely satisfying a description because *there is no such description*. This helped motivate the *Direct Reference* theory, which says the content of a name is just its referent. But Howard Wettstein, Michael Devitt, and Gregory Bochner (to name just a few) contend that this isn't the real lesson of those illustrations.³³ The real lesson is, rather, that the content of a name isn't determined by what's 'in the user's head'.

³² Indeed, Wettstein is dismissive of propositions later in his book: "The project of this book has not been one of finding a way to think about propositional content. Indeed, I'm calling into question the utility of propositions. Propositions no longer play their key role as objects of attitudes. Moreover, the idea of propositions as representational intermediaries seems out of sync with the direct reference antirepresentationalist tendency" (Wettstein, 2004, p. 230).

³³ See Wettstein (2004), Devitt (1980, 1981, 1984, and 1990), and Bochner (2014).

The view Kripke is criticizing in *N&N* gets called the “cluster theory of names” (p. 64), and it’s clear that this (as it’s articulated by Kripke) is a mentalist theory about the content of names. Its first three theses make this clear:

- (1) To every name or designating expression ‘X’, there corresponds a cluster of properties, namely the family of those properties ϕ such that *A* believes ‘ ϕX ’.
- (2) One of the properties, or some conjointly, are believed by *A* to pick out some individual uniquely.
- (3) If most, or a weighted most, of the ϕ ’s are satisfied by one unique object *y*, then *y* is the referent of ‘X’.³⁴

(1) - (3) say that the referent of a name is whatever uniquely satisfies the content of ‘X’, and that the content of ‘X’ is determined by some of the speaker’s beliefs (namely, her beliefs about some of the properties exemplified by X). The Gödel-Schmidt example is one where “Gödel” refers to Gödel, even though (3) isn’t satisfied: the property (or cluster of properties) we believe the referent of “Gödel” satisfies are actually satisfied by *Schmidt*, though Schmidt isn’t the referent of “Gödel”. The Feynman example is one where “Feynman” refers to Feynman even though (2) isn’t satisfied: we might not have any beliefs about properties *uniquely* satisfied by the referent of “Feynman”.³⁵

The point isn’t restricted to *names*; consider natural kind terms like “water” or “tiger”. Putnam’s twin-earth case is supposed to show that the referents of these terms aren’t determined by anything about the speaker’s mental states, either. Let’s stipulate that *A* lives on earth, *B* on twin-earth, *B* is *A*’s twin (they have the same mental states), and the stuff that looks and is treated just like water (H₂O) on twin-earth is XYZ. *B*’s use of “water” picks out XYZ, whereas *A*’s use of “water” picks out H₂O. Again, the reference shift can’t be explained by differences in *A*’s and *B*’s mental states; it’s stipulated that they have *the same* mental states (Putnam, 1973 & 1975).

Finally, consider the contents of whole sentences. If I mistakenly utter, “Cicero was a famous Greek orator”, then I’ve said something *false*. It would be no defense that I *know* Cicero is a Roman (nor that I’d intended to say “Roman” instead of “Greek”). Suppose I believe that Cicero is Roman, not Greek, and that I simply misspoke when I made the utterance above. My belief is true, but my utterance is false—that is, the *content* of my utterance is false. But if my beliefs (or mental states more generally) help determine the content of my utterances, then why is the content of this

³⁴ (1) – (3) are found in Kripke (1972), p. 71

³⁵ For more on this, see Wettstein (2004), ch. 3.

utterance *false*? It's not automatically obvious what's supposed to be said here. One could try to argue that I really did have a confused belief or mental representation when making this utterance, but this cuts against the stipulation that I merely *misspoke*. Surely we *can* fail to communicate what we're really thinking; this observation is hard to accommodate on the mentalist picture where mental states (like thoughts) *determine* content.

2. Here is one more piece of the intuitive case against mentalism, this one suggesting that *linguistic meaning* determines mental content. The thought experiment in three steps (which I'm quoting at length) comes from Burge (1979):

First Step: A given person has a large number of attitudes commonly attributed with content clauses containing 'arthritis' in oblique occurrence. For example, he thinks (correctly) that he has had arthritis for years ..., that stiffening joints is a symptom of arthritis, that certain sorts of aches are characteristic of arthritis, that there are various kinds of arthritis, and so forth.... In addition to these unsurprising attitudes, he thinks falsely that he has developed arthritis in the thigh....

Second Step: We are to conceive of a situation in which the patient proceeds from birth through the same course of physical events that he actually does, right to and including the time at which he first reports his fear [that he has arthritis in his thigh] to his doctor. Precisely the same things...happen to him.... The *counterfactuality* in the supposition touches only the patient's social environment. In actual fact, 'arthritis', as used in his community, does not apply to ailments outside joints.... But in our imagined case, physicians, lexicographers, and informed laymen apply 'arthritis' not only to arthritis but to various other rheumatoid ailments. The standard use of the term is to be conceived to encompass the patient's actual misuse....

Third Step: In the counterfactual situation, the patient lacks some—probably *all*—the attitudes commonly attributed with the content clauses containing 'arthritis' in oblique occurrence. He lacks the occurrent thoughts or beliefs that he has arthritis in the thigh, that he has had arthritis for years..., and so on. We suppose that in the counterfactual case we cannot correctly ascribe any content containing an oblique occurrence of the term 'arthritis'.... The upshot of these reflections is that the patient's mental contents differ while his entire physical and non-intentional mental histories, considered in isolation from their social context, remain the same. (Burge, 1979, pp. 77-79)

Call the person in this scenario "Fred"; intuitively Fred's belief that he has arthritis in his thigh is false—he doesn't have arthritis in his thigh. But the belief Fred communicates to his doctor with "I have arthritis in my thigh" in the counterfactual scenario is true. What accounts for Fred's change in belief across these situations is not a change in any of his physical or non-intentional

mental states (this is ruled out in the second step). Rather, it looks like the only thing that could explain the difference in Fred's belief is the difference in social contexts, namely that communities in the actual and counterfactual situations use the term "arthritis" differently. If that's right, then an analysis of what it is for Fred to have a certain belief must appeal to features of his social context (in particular, features about speakers' uses of terms like "arthritis"). This looks like bad news for mentalism, according to which the order of priority runs in the opposite direction.

1.5 A Version of Weak Mentalism

1.5.1 Against Wettstein's Argument

A tempting response is to dismiss at least a subset of the reasons given in section 1.4 by pointing out that they apply only to an especially vulnerable version of mentalism. It's the *strong* mentalist who needs to worry about Kripke's "Gödel" and "Feynman" or Burge's "arthritis" examples, since it really does seem in those examples like a user's actual mental states have no bearing whatsoever on the content/referent of the relevant expressions. This is of no consequence for the weak mentalist, who doesn't require that a speaker's *actual* mental states play a role in determining the content/referent of an expression.

Consider, for instance, a view that will receive a great deal of attention in this dissertation—viz. the one defended by Soames and Hanks, which identifies propositions with *types of cognitive acts*. Theirs is a mentalist view, because their proposed analysis of a claim of the form "s means that p" would make reference to possible (if not actual) mental states with representational properties. On their view, the sentence "Fred has arthritis" means that Fred has arthritis because it expresses a type of cognitive act—one every token of which is/would be true iff Fred has arthritis. Soames and Hanks do not say (and are not committed to holding) that the *expresses* relation must be secured by a token of the expressed proposition. (It could be that "Fred has arthritis" expresses the proposition ⟨Fred has arthritis⟩ because of some social conventions, for instance.) So, this view is a version of weak mentalism, and, because it brushes off as irrelevant a speaker's actual mental states when it comes to determining the content of an expression, it's not vulnerable to several of the examples from section 1.4.³⁶

³⁶ It's no obstacle in principle to Soames' and Hanks' view that I can assert propositions about Feynman without knowing much of anything about Feynman. What is actually 'going on' in my head when I utter

However, merely retreating from strong to weak mentalism displays insufficient appreciation for the core of these two cases against mentalism. Put in their best light, the two cases threaten that mental states are *simply irrelevant* to sentence meaning. The lesson learned from Kripke's examples may, in fact, be that uses of "Gödel" refer to Godel, and "Feynman" to Feynman regardless of anyone's actual *or possible* mental states. This is a threat to mentalism in general, and it's the one captured in Wettstein's argument from section 1.4.1.

Wettstein's charge, you'll recall, was that there's no explanatory purchase to introducing further representations beyond the linguistic ones already being considered: not only do the very same problems apply to those further representations as well, but unfiltered reflection on our linguistic practices doesn't (or so says Wettstein) compel us to introduce another level of representation either. The charge is, in short (and as I'm understanding it), that these non-linguistic representations are merely theoretical posits, and *ineffective* ones at that. If that's true, then mentalism looks seriously (if not fatally) flawed.

But I deny that mental representations are merely theoretical posits introduced for the express purpose of helping to make sense of linguistic representation. This is not how I reached/defended the (mentalist) intuition about intentionality back in section 1.1.2. I take it as a *given* that there are mental representations and there are good reasons for thinking that those representations aren't linguistic; for instance, I can think about Aristotle (and this is, at least in part, to enjoy a mental representation of Aristotle) without knowing / having recourse to a word that refers to Aristotle (hence, mental reference can obtain without linguistic reference). So, when problems arise surrounding the possibility of reference and sentence meaning, mental representations are already available for us. To have mental representations at the ready but decline to use them toward this purpose would surely be puzzling, given (at least) the intuitive case from section 1.3.2. Therefore, I respond that, if we take mental representation as a given, then the burden of proof is not on the mentalist, but her opponent. (The non-mentalist doesn't get to shrug off the two cases for mentalism.)

"Feynman is a physicist" needn't be relevant to determining the content of that utterance. It might be that what determines the content of my utterance is a set of conventions (details of which aren't needed for my purposes here), holding regardless of what I'm thinking at the time. There's no glaring tension between holding this view about what secures the *expression* relation and the mentalist view about the logical priority of mental over linguistic representation. (I take it that it's straightforward how Soames and Hanks would handle the other examples from the intuitive case against mentalism.)

What's more, I deny that mental representations are explanatorily barren. At the very least, the mentalist isn't worse off than the Wittgensteinian who opts to 'explain' sentence meaning by describing linguistic practice. Questions about mental representation afford different answers (or avenues of exploration) than questions about linguistic representation. For this reason, the mentalist move to shift focus from linguistic to mental representation (by explaining the former in terms of the latter) does more than put off the problem. If we take (the existence of) mental representations as a given, then we'll need to face questions about how those work anyway; mentalism offers a way to avoid compounding these questions. (Note that this response does not depend on whether we treat mental representation as unanalyzable.)

Wettstein's argument seems to me the most probing criticism of mentalism that we've considered so far. If my response is sound, then mentalism comes out unscathed. We're now ready to explore a version of weak mentalism that circumvents the other criticisms from section 1.4.

1.5.2 An Expressionist Semantics

The theoretical case against mentalism alleged that two important versions of mentalism can't be right. My response turns on the fact that this is not an *in principle* case against mentalism. The lesson we should draw from the theoretical case is not that mentalism is false, but only that the dominant versions of mentalism are false. There's another version of mentalism (viz. the *expressionist* one) that's available, and which more closely resembles the one passed down from Aristotle, through Augustine, to John Locke.³⁷ I'll present it here, highlighting how this view is an improvement on the other two versions of mentalism covered above.³⁸

At the core of expressionist mentalism is the claim that spoken words are signs of *mental* words. Just as a wreath hung at the entrance of a tavern signals that wine is sold inside (a favored Medieval example), one's utterance signals (some of) the thoughts she's having at the time. Here is Augustine's presentation in *De Trinitate*:

³⁷ Some contemporary philosophers endorse, or (briefly) express sympathy for a version of expressionism. See Wayne Davis (2002 & 2005), and Dennis Stampe (1977, fn 15). Thanks to Rod Bertolet for pointing out the latter to me.

³⁸ How does expressionism relate to the Lockean theory of meaning I endorsed at the start of this chapter? In the following way: Expressionism is a foundational theory of meaning (i.e. a theory about how linguistic expressions get their contents); the Lockean theory is a semantic theory (i.e. a theory about the nature of semantic contents).

If anyone then can understand how a word can be, not only before it is spoken aloud but even before the images of its sounds are turned over in thought—this is the word that belongs to no language ...; but when it is necessary to convey the knowledge in the language of those we are speaking to, some sign is adopted to signify this word. And ... sometimes also a gesture is presented, ... in order that bodily signs may make the word we carry in our minds known to their bodily senses. What after all is gesticulating but a way of speaking visibly? ... Thus the word which makes a sound outside is the sign of the word which lights up inside, and it is this latter that primarily deserves the name of “word”. For the one that is uttered by the mouth of flesh is really the sound of a word, and it is called “word” too because of the one which assumes it in order to be manifested outwardly. Thus in a certain fashion our word becomes a bodily sound by assuming that in which it is manifested to the senses of men. (*De Trin.* 10 11, p. 411)

Augustine, like Grice, acknowledges the communicative intentions behind utterances (as he should, since that’s platitudinous). A thought *assumes* a spoken utterance when we intend to communicate it to our audience.³⁹ In modern parlance, we’d say a thought is the content of an utterance when we intend to communicate it to our audience. But this is different from saying that an utterance having content *consists in* the speaker having certain communicative intentions (e.g. the Gricean ones from section 1.4.1). It’s consistent with Augustine’s remarks above that communicative intentions simply explain why thoughts are (sometimes) ‘put into’ words, without shedding any light on how the relation between thoughts and utterances should be analyzed. (The expressionist does not analyze the relation between thoughts and utterances in terms of certain communicative intentions.)

Because the *expression* relation isn’t being analyzed in terms of communicative intentions, expressionism avoids the problems faced by the Gricean theory. The examples involving Smith and his boss illustrated that communicative intentions are neither necessary nor sufficient for speaker-meaning. Expressionism accommodates this by declining to say that utterance meaning consists in those kinds of intentions.

How, then, should an expressionist understand the expression relation—the relation we’ve been saying holds between a sentence and its meaning? It seems that the relation is just the one holding between a sign and the thing signified. One could argue that this relation obtains in virtue of a convention pairing signs with signifiabiles (think of the wreath signaling that a tavern sells

³⁹ I’m assuming that it’s safe to switch from *mental words assuming spoken ones* (what we see in Augustine) to *thoughts assuming utterances*.

wine). One may also think that this relation can obtain in virtue of someone's (arbitrary) stipulation (e.g., when I hold up the thimble and say, "this is me"). With this in mind, we can present expressionist mentalism this way:

(E) s means that $p \leftrightarrow s$ is a sign of p

If we take p (as I think we should) to pick out a mental sentence—a (complex) mental *representation*—then it's clear how (E) is a version of mentalism: it offers an analysis of sentence meaning in terms of mental representations (mental representation is logically prior to linguistic representation). It's because s can be a sign of p in virtue of the speaker's stipulation (rather than her communicative intentions) that (E) avoids all the problems which befell the Gricean strategy. Moreover, since (E) does not analyze sentence meaning in terms of the beliefs someone would have were she to accept the sentence, (E) avoids the problem facing the second main version of mentalism, too.

The meaning-conferring relation (which I identify as the *signifying* relation) is the one which holds between linguistic expressions (the signs) and the mental representations (the things signified). In other words, mental representations are the semantic contents of linguistic expressions in virtue of the fact they're *the things signified* by those expressions. Advocates for structured propositions say that a proposition expressed by a sentence, s , is composed of the contents of the expressions that make up s , 'held together' in a certain way. If propositions are structured, and the contents of linguistic expressions are mental representations, then propositions are complex mental representations, and the things signified by (declarative) sentences. (I defend a more detailed version of the view that propositions are complex mental representations in Chapter 3.)

A concern might be that expressionism (as I'm presenting it) yields an unacceptable result: because words are signs of mental representations, it follows that words are *about* mental representations. The name "Cleopatra" is about a mental word, "*Cleopatra*", rather than my cat, or the Egyptian queen. Correspondingly, on this picture, a spoken sentence can only be about another (mental) sentence, and never directly about the way things are outside of the mind.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ This has been called the "Wrong Subject Matter Objection", and it's a common objection to theories like this one. To see how it's applied to Locke's theory of meaning, and how Locke can respond to it, see Powell (2017).

To see how a proponent of the expressionist view can respond to this objection, imagine it used as an objection to propositional theories of meaning. (The strategy a propositional theorist will use against the objection is available to the expressionist, too.) As a criticism of the propositional theory of meaning, the objection goes like this: because words express constituents of propositions, it follows that words are *about* those constituents. The name “Cleopatra” is about a constituent of a proposition, rather than about my cat, or the Egyptian queen. (True, this objection cuts no ice against views on which there are *singular proposition*—propositions with, say, my cat or the Egyptian queen as constituents. But this is pitched as an objection to propositional theories of meaning *in general*, and many such theories *deny* that propositions have the entities they’re about as constituents.) Correspondingly, on (some) propositional theories of meaning, a sentence can only be about a *proposition*, and never straightforwardly about anything else.⁴¹

The obvious response is that the objector has misconstrued what it takes for a sentence (or a word) to be *about* something. While it’s true that sentences express propositions, this is not to say that sentences are *about* propositions. Strictly speaking, aboutness is reserved for propositions, and sentential aboutness is derived therefrom (a sentence represents things as being a certain way in virtue of expressing a proposition which represents things as being that way). What this means is that the expression relation is very different from that in virtue of which a proposition manages to be about something: this relation doesn’t make a sentence about the other relatum. It seems to me that the expressionist can say something similar: aboutness (at least, the aboutness we care about when we say that a sentence is about the world, my cat, or whatever) is reserved for mental representations; the signifying relation is not one that makes the signifier *about* the thing signified (at least, not in the sense that interests us). The expressionist is therefore only committed to saying that mental representations and sentences don’t represent the same way.⁴²

The claim here is not *ad hoc*. It seems appropriate to ask of a sign (say, of a sign along the road that you’d never seen before), “what does that mean”? If that’s true, it strongly suggests that our concept of a sign is a concept of something with *content*. So, *qua* signs (if they are signs) words

⁴¹ If you’re Trenton Merricks, you probably don’t think that propositions have constituents. Even so, a sentence expresses a proposition, so the last sentence of the objection targets your view as well.

⁴² This seems reasonable, since, if words signify, then (as I mentioned above) they signify either *by convention* or *by stipulation*. But it seems clear to me that mental representations don’t signify by convention or stipulation. It’s fair to ask *how*, then, a mental representation gets its representational properties; fortunately, that’s beside the point here.

are content-bearers, and this is exactly what we'd expect if the ____ *signifies* ____ relation is one that can deliver content for the left-hand relatum. Moreover, if I tell you that a certain sign means that deer might run across the road ahead, there's no temptation to say that the sign is *about* the aforementioned that-clause. So, the signifying relation can deliver content for the sign, but does not (strictly speaking make the sign *about* the thing signified).⁴³

1.5.3 Meaning Without Content

As I mentioned above, the expressionist view I endorse in this dissertation says that linguistic expressions are signs of mental representations, with some complex linguistic expressions (viz. declarative sentences) being signs of complex mental representations (viz. propositions). Let's put that view like this (where *p* picks out a token mental representation):

s means that *p* ↔ *s* is a sign of *p*

I also noted that the view I defend is a *weak* version of mentalism, so I deny that a claim of the form *s means that p* must be analyzed in terms of *s*'s relation to an actual mental state. The thought here is that *s* can be a *sign* of *p* even though there is no *p*. This is needed in order to respond to some of the problems raised in section 1.4, as well as the problems mentioned off-handedly near the end of section 1.2.2 (recall: sentences in forgotten languages, instances of misspeaking, or speaking 'without thinking').

It's important for what follows to note that weak mentalism does *not* say that an instance of *s*'s meaning that *p* *can't* be analyzed in terms of *s*'s relation to an actual mental state. The claim is only that such an instance *need not* be analyzed in those terms. This makes room for two possibilities: one where (an instance of) *s*'s meaning that *p* is analyzed in terms of *s*'s relation to a *merely possible* mental state, and another where (an instance of) *s*'s meaning that *p* is analyzed in terms of *s*'s relation to an *actual* mental state. Recall that the relevant relation between *s* and an actual or possible mental state is the *signifying* relation. If we introduce the possibility of *s* signifying merely possible mental states, while denying that there 'are' (i.e. that there exist such

⁴³ There's an *indirect* sense in which the ____ *signifies* ____ relation *does* make the sign about something (viz. by allowing the sign to inherit the about-ness property(ies) of the thing signified), but that sense isn't relevant here.

things as) merely possible mental states, then we've introduced the possibility of meaning without content.

Is this coherent? Can there be such a thing as a sign without the thing signified? It seems like the answer is "yes". Consider one way in which an expression might become a sign—viz. by a *convention* which assigns to the expression its signifying responsibility. We talk about conventional assignments of signifying functions when we say, "in *English*, 'Cicero is Roman' means ⟨Cicero is Roman⟩". Other examples of conventional signs include the above mentioned wreath (signaling that a tavern sells wine), street signs (warning, e.g., that deer might be crossing ahead), and mailbox flags (signaling that someone wants the postman to deliver the contents).

When it comes to conventional signs, there's clearly some sense in which the object has its particular signifying responsibility regardless of the mental states of the one who deployed the sign. Suppose there's a convention in my neighborhood which says: *leave your porch light on during Halloween to signal that you'll give candy to trick-or-treaters that ring your doorbell*. If I mistakenly leave my porch light on, without a thought about giving out candy, I might reasonably be told that leaving my porch light on *signaled* that I will give candy etc., *even if* I've clarified that I was unaware of the convention, and that I left the light on by accident.

This example is analogous to someone misusing a word in her language out of ignorance of the word's actual meaning in that language. (Lycan gives an example of someone calling Mozart's 'Piccolomini' Mass 'jejune', thinking that 'jejune' means something like *puerile*. See Lycan, 2018, p. 87.) In such a case it seems right to say that, in *some* sense, what the person said is not what she intended to say. That sense is the one corresponding to the *conventional* meaning of the sentence. If we modify the porch light example so that I *am* aware of the convention, but simply forget to turn off my porch light, then the example is closely analogous to the case where I merely accidentally identify Cicero as a Greek, knowing full well what "Greek" means, and that Cicero wasn't Greek. A convention (in English) is that "Cicero is a famous Greek orator" (uttered in a certain context) signifies a mental representation of things being such that Cicero is a famous Greek orator.

More to the point: if I utter, say, "Cicero is a famous Greek orator" there's a set of conventions in virtue of which this utterance (in English) is a sign of a mental representation—viz. one which represents things as being such that Cicero is a famous Greek Orator. In other words, there's a set of conventions in virtue of which this utterance expresses the (really: *a*) proposition, ⟨Cicero was

a famous Greek orator). These conventions hold even if *no one* is entertaining such a mental representation. Hence, “Cicero is a famous Greek orator” can be a sign of a proposition, even though that proposition doesn’t exist. In this way, it’s possible for “Cicero was a famous Greek orator” to *mean* that Cicero was a famous Greek orator despite failing to express a proposition.

Now consider a second way for a word to become a sign—viz. by *stipulation*. I might look at my cat and say, “your name is ‘Cleopatra’”, at which point, the word “Cleopatra” (used in the right context) has a certain signifying responsibility (viz. for the expressionist, the responsibility of signifying a mental representation of this cat). Consider the example from Dretske (1995) of someone taking items more-or-less arbitrarily off her desk and assigning them representational functions (e.g. this piece of popcorn represents so-and-so, and this coin represents someone on the opposing team).⁴⁴ Or. I might mark an “x” in the margin of a page, signaling that I’m concerned about something said in the adjacent paragraph. These things (words, coins, pieces of popcorn, and x’s) get their signifying functions not by a *convention* (since, we may assume, there *isn’t* an appropriate convention in any of these cases), but by my stipulation (decision, intention, etc.) that these things be signs.

When I misuse a word—out of ignorance (as in Lycan’s “jejune” case), or by a fluke (as in the Cicero case)—I’m nevertheless assigning that word the responsibility of signifying a particular mental representation (whichever one that I’m trying to express by my use of that word). In this way, I stipulate that the word signifies that mental representation. Expanding this account to cover sentences gives us a way to accommodate those intuitions from section 1.3.2 (e.g. that the student who misuses the term ‘moral relativism’ nevertheless *meant* by his utterance that he thinks there’s moral disagreement across groups). We can say that, in those cases, *s* signifies (by a kind of stipulation) an *actual* mental representation. The sense in which a sentence *means that ...* by expressing an actual mental representation is what I referred to in section 1.1.1 as the *full-blooded* sense of meaning.

To sum up: the introduction of *conventional* and *stipulative* signification gives us a way to accommodate intuitions on both sides of the aisle. We can say (again) that the student *meant* (in

⁴⁴ Don’t be distracted by my use of “represents” here, as if I’m suddenly attributing representational properties directly to things like *coins* and *popcorn pieces*. (As it turns out, Dretske himself didn’t think that’s what’s going on in those cases; see Dretske, 1995, pp. 53–4.) The Augustinian can easily analyze this talk as a roundabout way of describing what actually happens (viz. that coins and popcorn pieces are ‘hooked up’ to mental representations via the signifying relation).

one sense) that he thinks there's moral disagreement across groups, though the sentence meant (in another sense) that he thinks the right-making feature of an action is its conformity to a group's social norms. The sense in which it meant the former corresponds the utterance's stipulative signification; the sense in which it meant the latter corresponds to the utterance's conventional signification.

(This may look like a rehash of Grice's distinction between *speaker-* and *sentence-*meaning, but it's not. Grice's distinction explains how a single utterance can at once express distinct propositions; My distinction does not do this. Introducing the difference between *conventional* and *stipulative* signification accommodates the fact that a single utterance can at once "mean" more than one thing; however, it does this *without* requiring that the utterance expresses distinct propositions.)

By now I hope to have said enough in response to theoretical case against Mentalism. In the rest of this chapter, I'll address what's left of the intuitive case from section 1.4.2.

1.6 Responding to the Intuitive Case

The Gödel-Schmidt and Feynman examples are supposed to show that our mental states don't determine the contents of our (uses of) names. It's tempting to think that the force of each example hinges on the descriptivist theory they help criticize. The descriptivist says that my belief that the referent of "Gödel" uniquely satisfies ϕ helps to determine the referent of (a use of) "Gödel". But it seems obvious that the referent of Gödel might (to my surprise) fail to satisfy ϕ ; this shows that *mentalism* about reference (that is *individualism*) is false *on the presumption of descriptivism* about mental content is true. Replace descriptivism about mental content with some other theory, and this problem disappears.

But, in fact, that's a mistake. An objection in the same spirit can be raised for *any* mentalist theory about names. This is because the objection really turns on the priority of mental over linguistic reference. Once it's alleged that linguistic reference is parasitic on mental reference, it's reasonable to ask, "could there really be no intuitive case where the referents of a mental state and its corresponding linguistic expression diverge?" Bochner (2014) is a case in point. He presents the following three examples where mental and linguistic reference fail to align (and where it seems this failure needn't be tied to a descriptivist theory of mental content).

(A) On seeing Smith in his yard, and mistaking him for Jones, I ask, “what is Jones doing?” My use of “Jones” refers to Jones, even though my corresponding mental state (Bochner focuses on the speaker’s *intention*) picks out Smith.

(B) Deceived by a mirage in the desert, I point and exclaim, “water there!” though there is no water ahead. My use of “water” fails to pick out anything, even though my corresponding mental state picks out some watery-stuff that I see (whatever it is).

(C) Jim and Joe are identical twins, with Joe frequently posing as Jim. Oblivious to this, I say “Jim is visiting tomorrow”. My use of “Jim” refers to Jim, even though my corresponding mental state doesn’t discriminate between Jim and Joe.⁴⁵

These examples cut no ice against the expressionist view I presented in section 1.5. Because that theory has *conventional signification* handy, it can help itself to referents set by linguistic conventions. Those conventions map “Gödel” (albeit indirectly) onto Gödel, “Feynman” (albeit indirectly) onto Feynman, “Smith” (albeit indirectly) onto Smith, etc. The expressionist may concede that there is some sense in which the referent of a term is not determined by the referent of one of its user’s mental states. Obviously, this does not tell against her theory of *stipulative signification*—i.e. of what proposition is the actual content of the utterance.

Unlike the Gödel-Schmidt and Feynman examples (A) – (C) are, I contend, instances of *acceptable* misalignment between mental and linguistic reference. It would be a serious mistake for the expressionist to try and leverage the conventional-/stipulative-signification distinction to rescue Mentalism from Kripke’s examples. There’s simply no denying that “Gödel” picks out Gödel, and “Feynman” picks out Feynman in those cases; any mentalist theory worth its salt will show how mental and linguistic reference align in those cases. But things aren’t so clear in (A) – (C). I can at least speak for myself here: while it seems right to say that my use of “Jones” picks out Jones, even if the person I’d intended to refer to isn’t Jones, it’s no less obvious to me that I *did*, somehow, manage to refer to Smith.⁴⁶ The pressure (in Kripke’s cases) to align mental and linguistic reference is missing (or seriously reduced) in (A) – (C).

⁴⁵ Bochner (2014), pp. 104-107.

⁴⁶ And I might be conceding too much to Bochner already. I *could* simply contend that there’s no tension whatsoever between my use of “Jones” referring to Jones, and whatever mental states/intentions I enjoyed at the time of the utterance. After all, I thought that man *was* Jones, and so there’s a sense in which I intended to refer to Jones. So, even if I were to concede that “Jones” refers to Jones, it doesn’t automatically follow that I must also concede that mental and linguistic reference diverge here.

Does my expressionist view have the resources to align both types of reference in Kripke's examples? I think so. Let "m" pick out the mental content corresponding to "Gödel" (or "Feynman", if you like). We need only say that the referent of m is fixed on the man Gödel (or Feynman) and without the mediation of (clusters of) properties (but, of course, not by having Gödel or Feynman as the content of m). This guarantees that m can refer to Gödel or Feynman even if the bearer of m isn't aware of any properties distinctly possessed by Gödel or Feynman; more generally, it guarantees that the referent of m is not determined by anyone's beliefs about what properties are (not) instantiated by Gödel or Feynman. It might be that the referent of m is the dominant (causal) source of (the bearer of m's) information corresponding to "Gödel" and "Feynman".⁴⁷ If this is right, then it's easy to see how m still refers to Gödel (or Feynman) in Kripke's example, even if it turns out that Schmidt discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic (or that I have no discriminating knowledge of Feynman). Cases where mental and linguistic reference diverge resemble (A) - (C), where that divergence is acceptable.

Employing this (admittedly very crude sketch of a) strategy to explain mental reference also allows for a straightforward handling of Putnam's twin-earth examples. We'll notice that *my* mental content corresponding to "water" has a different referent from that of my twin, and we can explain this by pointing out that the dominant source of information corresponding to *my* mental content is H₂O, whereas the dominant source corresponding to that of my twin is XYZ. A proponent of my expressionist view, capitalizing on this theory of mental reference, gets around the twin-earth examples by resisting the stipulation that my twin and I have the same mental content.⁴⁸

Burge's "arthritis" example improves on the twin-earth one by recognizing that Fred and his counterpart have different mental states. Recall that he diagnoses a difference in social context (viz. conventions surrounding use of the term "arthritis") as the cause for the different belief states between Fred and his counterpart. So, conventions surrounding the use of linguistic expressions in some sense determines some of Fred's intentional mental states. Even if we grant that this is true,

⁴⁷ See Evans (1973).

⁴⁸ Devitt points out that Putnam's examples are only intending to show that *narrow* psychological states don't determine reference; while we may use Evans' theory to explain how my twin and I differ with respect to *wide* psychological states, we don't differ at the level of narrow psychological states. See Devitt (1990), p. 81. All right; even so, it suffices for the expressionist that *wide* psychological states determine content. If Devitt is right, this only goes to show that twin-earth cases shouldn't be leveraged as counterexamples to mentalism.

more needs to be said for this to qualify as a counterexample to mentalism. There's no inconsistency in affirming both that *i)* Fred's belief states are determined by the conventional meanings of linguistic expressions, and *ii)* mentalism is true.

Mentalism is a claim first and foremost about how sentential representation is analyzed. The view entails that mental representation can't be analyzed in terms of sentential representation. Does the "arthritis" example cut against either of these? It seems not. For the example to show that mental representation should be analyzed in terms of sentential representation, it would need to show that analysans for *Fred's believing that p* must be in terms of a linguistic expression which means that *p*. One may take the example to be evidencing that very thing, but she doesn't have to. She might say instead that the example only shows that the conventional meaning of linguistic expressions determine which mental state(s) Fred acquires. When she says this, she's not saying anything about how mental representation should be correctly analyzed.

Nor does the example automatically show that sentential representation *isn't* properly analyzed in terms of mental representation. There's no inconsistency in saying that the conventions highlighted in the "arthritis" example are correctly analyzed in terms of mental representations—perhaps in the way presented in the discussion surrounding conventional stipulation in section 1.5.3. Of course, one is free to say that the example *really does* evidence that sentential representation can't be properly analyzed in terms of mental representation, but the example doesn't force that interpretation on us.

In short, the "arthritis" example is neutral with respect to mentalism. To take it as a counterexample to mentalism, we must first interpret the example a certain way. However, an argument for interpreting the example this way would be an argument against mentalism. It's only after we're already convinced that mentalism is false that we'll see the "arthritis" story as a counterexample to mentalism. Therefore, to leverage it as an objection to mentalism amounts to begging the question.

1.7 Conclusion

The dispute between *mentalism and non-mentalism* is a difficult one (intuitions pulling in both directions). I don't purport to have settled the matter in favor of mentalism—that's a multi-chapter project of its own. I *do* purport to have offered a plausible mentalist theory of meaning, and some responses to standard objections to mentalism. The motive behind all of this was to put a Lockean

theory of meaning (according to which propositions are token mental representations) back on the table.

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CHAPTER 2. A NOMINALIST THEORY OF CONTENT

2.1 Introduction

Nowadays hardly anyone denies that propositions (the contents of sentences, objects of belief, and primary truth-bearers) are abstract objects. Rosen (2017) takes what is now the orthodox position when he says that propositions are among the “clear cases” of abstracta, alongside classes, concepts, and types. Virtually all the popular views of propositional content on the market say that propositions are abstract objects of one kind or other, whether they’re sets (Lewis), facts (King), properties (Speaks), types of cognitive acts (Soames, Hanks), or *sui generis* entities (Merricks). Only in passing comments will one find propositions described as concrete objects,⁴⁹ and these comments don’t seem to garner much attention. One would have to go back to the scholastics to find (what at least looks like) a nominalist theory of propositions enjoying sustained treatment (and, for that matter, widespread support).⁵⁰ It’s safe to say, by way of summary, that contemporary debates about the nature of propositions are presently dominated by realists.

Blame (or credit) for the current state of affairs is usually given first to Frege here. In “The Thought” (1918) Frege argued that thoughts (the contents of declarative sentences) must be denizens of a “third realm” alongside the realm of material and mental things.⁵¹ While Frege didn’t cash out his argument as a refutation of the position that propositions are concrete objects, the argument can be formulated as such with only a few modifications:

- (1) If propositions are concrete objects, then they’re either mental or material things
- (2) Propositions aren’t mental things (because they’re sharable)

⁴⁹ See Addis (1989) pp. 81-85, and maybe Fumerton (2002, p. 12).

⁵⁰ Ockham’s view—which is, at least at a very general level, the one I’ll end up defending in this dissertation—that propositions are a certain kind of particular (viz. token mental sentences) was the standard view of his time. See Brower-Toland (Forthcoming).

⁵¹ It’s standard fare to say that Frege was articulating a theory about *propositions*, despite the fact that his preferred term is “thought”. See, for example, Wettstein (2004) p. 6. For one, “Der Gedanke” is treated as one of the seminal works in the analytic tradition on propositions (alongside, among others, his “On Sense and Reference” and Russell’s *Principles of Mathematics*). Moreover, Frege assigns to thoughts all the roles that would come to be regarded as the responsibilities of propositions. One of these roles was already mentioned: the contents of declarative sentences; the others are the objects of belief (and other propositional attitudes), and the primary bearers of truth-values.

- (3) Propositions aren't material things either (because they can't, even in principle, be perceived via the senses).
- ∴ (4) Propositions aren't concrete objects.⁵²

As we'll see shortly, the thrust of this Fregean argument is a powerful one, and most philosophers (at least, most who endorse a propositional theory of meaning) have been convinced by it. Propositions can't be concrete because they're "sharable"—by which Frege means that one and the same proposition can be grasped (i.e. entertained, doubted, believed, asserted, etc.) by more than one person—and none of the sharable particulars (tables, cats, pianos) are the sorts of things that can be asserted by the use of a sentence. Frege took it as obvious that propositions are sharable in this way,⁵³ and most philosophers after him follow suit.⁵⁴

There's no denying that, in some sense or other, we can share beliefs, doubts, hopes, assertions, and denials. However sharability need not be understood in terms of equal access to numerically the same proposition. To my knowledge, neither Frege nor anyone else after him has offered a careful, sustained defense of the claim that propositions are sharable *in this sense*. Nevertheless, it would be a serious mistake not to take that claim seriously. After all, it is a perfectly straightforward (arguably *the most* straightforward) understanding of shared belief, etc. Only someone in the grips of a theory would say otherwise. Frege and his successors simply say that this straightforward understanding of sharability is the correct one.⁵⁵ The result is a consensus that

⁵² Even earlier, in "On Sense and Reference", Frege distinguishes the sense of an expression like a proper name from *both* its referent *and* its corresponding idea. This at least seems to preclude senses from being *either* the things an expression is about *or* a psychological entity. He writes, "[t]he *Bedeutung* [referent] and sense of a sign are to be distinguished from the associated idea. If the *Bedeutung* of a sign is an object perceivable by the senses, then my idea of it is an internal image, arising from memories of sense impressions which I have had and acts, both internal and external, which I have performed.... The same sense is not always connected, even in the same man, with the same idea. The idea is subjective: one man's idea is not that of another. There result, as a matter of course, a variety of differences in ideas associated with the same sense.... *This constitutes an essential distinction between the idea and the sign's sense, which may be the common property of many people, and so is not a part or a mode of the individual mind.* For one can hardly deny that mankind has a common store of thoughts which is transmitted from one generation to another" (Frege, 1892, reprinted in Beaney, 1997, p. 154; Emphasis added.)

⁵³ See, again, the final sentence of the excerpt of "On Sense and Reference" in fn 52, above.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, G.E. Moore's "The Nature of Judgment" (1899); his prototype realist theory of propositions is probably inspired (albeit indirectly) from Frege's "On Sense and Reference". For a brief, but clear summary, see section 3 of Chapter 3 in Soames (2014c).

⁵⁵ If this isn't the sole reason most philosophers identify propositions with some type of abstracta, it is at least the most important one. See for example King (2014b) p. 50, Soames (2014b) p. 92, and the introduction of Hanks (2015). Merricks (2015) is an exception.

nominalism about propositions is a non-starter, for there aren't any particulars that could be asserted (or denied, believed, doubted, etc.) by more than one person.⁵⁶

What I'll call the "traditional" theory of propositions is one on which propositions are abstract objects that play one or more of the following propositional roles: the semantic contents of sentences, the objects of belief, and the primary bearers of truth-values.⁵⁷ This theory dominated the twentieth century. Only within the past twenty years has it started receiving sustained criticism. Critics have argued that the traditional notion of an abstract object that plays all three of those propositional roles is far too implausible to countenance, with the primary truth-bearer role usually receiving (albeit in not so many words) the brunt of the attack. The complaint is: unlike semantic contents and objects of belief, which (it's assumed) must be abstract, primary truth-bearers must be concrete. What many critics conclude from this is that propositions aren't primary truth-bearers after all.

It's interesting that, faced with the apparent implausibility of the traditional theory, critics choose to give up this propositional role. After all, there are other options, such as denying that semantic contents and objects of belief need to be abstract, or (what is less attractive) denying that propositions play those other two roles. It's especially interesting that those other options (especially the first one) generate so little interest. Is it really so obvious that the propositional theory of meaning can account for shared belief, doubt, or thought in no other way than by relating agents to numerically the same proposition? In my assessment, the answer is "no", and this (at least in my case) gets the possibility of a nominalist theory of propositions back on the table. The goal of this chapter is, in part, to get my readers to make the same assessment. Another part of the goal is to convince my readers that a nominalist theory of propositions (in particular, one according

⁵⁶ I suppose that one option is for the nominalist to be a fictionalist about propositions. (Indeed, I'd suspect that many nominalists *are* fictionalists about propositions.) She may say something like this: "it's useful to talk about propositions [sharable, abstract contents of sentences, or objects of attitudes], but in fact there are no such things". But this puts her in an awkward place. Is she denying that there are semantic contents, objects of belief, and primary bearers of truth-values? (After all, those are the positions propositions are supposed to play.) The appropriate way for the fictionalist to respond is to say that semantic contents and objects of attitudes aren't really entities, but that we talk *as if* they are entities. But in saying this the fictionalist rejects propositional theories of content, since those theories say that contents really are entities. If this is right, then a nominalist can be a fictionalist about propositions, but she can't also endorse a propositional theory of content.

⁵⁷ There are really several traditional theories of propositions. Frege, Russell, and Merricks offer very different accounts of the nature of propositions, but each of those theories about propositions qualifies as traditional.

to which propositions are token mental representations) enjoys some important advantages over its popular realist rivals.

In section 2.1 of this chapter, I discuss at some length the main complaint which critics level against the traditional theory of propositions. By cashing out this complaint as an inconsistent triad, I'm able to identify three positions we can take with respect to the nature of propositions. One option gets identified with the traditional theory, another with the view popular among critics of the traditional theory, and a third with the underappreciated nominalist view that I'm defending. Then, in section 2.2, I discuss a few important advantages that the third option enjoys over the other two. Finally, in section 2.3, I respond to a few objections to the nominalist theory of propositions.

The view for which I'll start advocating here gets called "Nominalism" in this chapter. As we'll see, one of the consequences of nominalism is that the universal claim, *for any p, if p then it's true that p* is false. This looks like a serious problem for nominalism, and I devote the longest subsection of section 2.3 (viz. 2.3.3) to this problem, in proportion to the seriousness of the objection.

2.2 What's Wrong with the Traditional Theory?

2.2.1 Abstract Objects as Primary Truth-Bearers (The Problem of Magical Representation)

The traditional theory of propositions says that semantic contents, objects of belief, and primary bearers of truth-values are all the same type of thing. As I've already mentioned, many critics now reject this claim. It's a point in their favor that it's not obvious that the same entity plays all three roles. Why should we think, for example, that objects of belief (whatever those are supposed to be) are also the things that are in the *primary* bearers of alethic properties?⁵⁸ Since the concept of a proposition is a *functional* concept—that is, what falls under the concept are just things that play

⁵⁸ This is different from asking why we should think that propositions are true or false merely in some sense or other. When we ask for reasons to think that propositions are primary bearers of alethic properties, we are looking for arguments whose conclusion is that propositions have alethic properties *in a non-derivative way* (i.e. without 'inheriting' those properties from other bearers of alethic properties). It's clear that beliefs have truth-values, and this gives reason enough for thinking that propositions (the objects of belief) have truth values in some sense or other. However, this does not (or, does not *straightforwardly*) indicate that propositions are *primary* bearers of alethic properties.

designated roles—it will prove critical to determine whether the *primary truth-bearer* role can be dismissed without changing the topic of the conversation. So, let's see why one of the founders of the traditional view, Frege, thought that being a primary truth-bearer was somehow entailed by playing those other roles.

We'll need first to explain just what it is for something to be a primary truth-bearer. If something has truth-conditions (i.e. is true or false), then it's either a primary truth-bearer, or a derivative one. The distinction between primary and derivative truth-bearers is about what constitutes their having their respective truth-values. For a derivative truth-bearer, its having its truth-value consists in it standing in some relation to another entity with the same truth-value. Sentences are useful examples here: for a sentence to be true, it must (at least, on a propositional theory of meaning) express a true proposition; this is because the sentence's being true is *constituted by* its expressing a true proposition. Hence, sentences are derivative truth-bearers. By contrast, if something is true or false, but *not* in a derivative way (i.e. not by standing in some relation to another entity with the same truth-value), then it's a primary truth-bearer.

In "The Thought" Frege might have something like the primary-derivative distinction in mind. Consider how he distinguishes between the truth of sentences, and the truth of the *senses* of sentences.

What is it that we call a sentence? A series of sounds, but only if it has a sense....
And when we call a sentence true we really mean that its sense is true. And hence
the only thing that raises the question of truth at all is the sense of sentences. (p.
327)

Context is important here. In the first half of the paragraph from which this excerpt was lifted, Frege purports to have shown that truth-claims about pictures are reducible to truth-claims about sentences. In the excerpt, he carries out yet another reduction, this time from the truth of sentences to the truth of the senses of sentences. But it's here that the reduction stops: truth-claims about the senses of sentences are not to be reduced to truth-claims about something else. (This is what Frege means when he says that the sense of a sentence is "the only thing that raises the question of truth at all".) Let's now introduce a principle for translating reduction-talk to constitution-talk (note: nothing in "The Thought" prohibits us from doing this). The principle for translating reduction- to constitution-talk looks like this:

A truth-claim about x is reduced to a truth-claim about y \leftrightarrow x's being true is constituted in part by y's being true.

If this principle is in operation, then we see Frege distinguishing between, on the one hand, those things (like sentences) whose truth is constituted in part by the truth of something else, and, on the other hand, those things (like the senses of sentences) whose truth *isn't* constituted in part by the truth of something else. This is just the distinction between derivative and primary truth-bearers, respectively.

While even non-declarative sentences (e.g. wishes, questions, and commands) have a sense, only *declarative* sentences express a thought properly so called (i.e. a sense with a truth-value). As for why thoughts get identified with the contents of (declarative) sentences, it seems that this is simply how Frege is *defining* content. The content of a sentence (the thought) is just that thing whose truth or falsity partly constitutes the truth or falsity of that sentence, without having *its* truth or falsity partly constituted by that of yet another thing. Put more simply: thoughts are the contents of sentences *because* they're the primary truth-bearers that partly constitute the truth (or falsity) of those sentences. Hence we may articulate Frege's definition of "semantic content" as follows:

The **semantic content** of a declarative sentence =_{def} The primary truth-bearer whose truth (or falsity) partly constitutes the truth (or falsity) of that expression.

We're now able to see why, at least for Frege, the entities that are semantic contents and objects of belief must also be primary truth-bearers: *being a primary truth-bearer* is built-in to *being semantic content*. So both roles seem equally indispensable to the functional concept of a proposition. In order to divorce these roles from each other, one would need to construe at least one of them differently. Because, as we've already seen, Frege also thinks semantic contents and objects of belief must be abstract, it falls out of his theory that primary truth-bearers must be abstract. This claim was essential to the traditional theory of propositions; but it would present a problem for that theory which many would eventually consider fatal. The problem, put in the form of a question, goes like this: is the possession of representational (and, therefore, alethic) properties by these abstract objects *analyzable*? Let me elaborate.

For any proposition, P, there is some sentence with which we can fill in the blank below, such that the biconditional comes out true:

P is true iff _____.⁵⁹

The right-hand side of the biconditional gives the truth-conditions of the proposition on the left-hand side (i.e. what must be the case in order for P to be true). One may then ask why P has *those* truth-conditions—that is, what is it about P such that it has those truth-conditions. The obvious answer is that P has those truth-conditions because P represents things as being that way: The proposition *⟨Harley is a dog⟩* represents things as being such that Harley is a dog, hence it's true iff Harley is a dog. But *how does ⟨Harley is a dog⟩ come to represent things as being such that she's a dog?* Must we, at some stage or other, identify some primitive representational properties in virtue of which that proposition has those truth conditions? Or, can those properties be paraphrased away at some level of analysis? Despite their surface disagreements, Frege, Russell, (as we'll see shortly) Trenton Merricks all answer these questions the same way. All three deny that representational properties can be completely analyzed away. Let's start with Frege.

Frege thought that, in the simplest cases, propositions are made up of objects (the senses of proper names) saturating concepts (the senses of predicates). *⟨Harley is a dog⟩*, for example, consists of the sense of “Harley” saturating the sense of “is a dog”; *⟨Harley is a dog⟩* is true, then, iff Harley *really is* a dog. If we think of truth-bearers as representations, then Frege's view is this: if the sense of “Harley” saturates the sense of “is a dog”, then the complex of these two senses thereby represents things as being such that Harley is a dog.

Russell (1903) thought that propositions are made up of the referents of names and predicate terms. On his view, *⟨Harley is a dog⟩* consists of Harley standing in some relation to the universal, *doghood*. In virtue of the fact that these constituents stand in this relation to each other, the

⁵⁹ I'm assuming here that there can be no propositions without truth-values, but I don't have an argument for this. Some sentences containing vague predicates may strike us, in some contexts, as neither true nor false. As I gradually lose my hair, at what point does the sentence “Vince is bald” express a *truth*? If it is not at the point at which I have no hair left, then there seems to be a ‘gray area’ where “Vince is bald” is neither true nor false, and hence where the proposition this sentence express is neither true nor false. For a discussion see Leftow (2012), pp. 90-92. I find this train of thought unconvincing. It's true that “Vince is bald” doesn't have clear truth-conditions, but it doesn't automatically follow that *the proposition it expresses* doesn't have clear truth-conditions. It could simply be that it's not clear *which* proposition the sentence expresses.

proposition represents things as being such that Harley is a dog, and is therefore true iff Harley *really is* a dog.⁶⁰

Unfortunately, neither of these accounts (as presented) succeed in explaining how propositions get their truth-conditions. This is problematic because such an explanation is precisely what those accounts were intending to provide. The Fregean claim that $\langle \text{Harley is a dog} \rangle$ has its truth conditions *because* it consists of the sense of “Harley” saturating the sense of “is a dog” looks like a non sequitur. The same goes for the Russellian who says that $\langle \text{Harley is a dog} \rangle$ has its truth conditions *because* it consists of Harley standing in the right relation to *doghood*. How does this follow? Frege and Russell might offer similar replies here. The former would say that it’s in virtue of the respective natures of concepts and objects that $\langle \text{Harley is a dog} \rangle$ gets its truth-conditions. The latter would say it’s in virtue of the instantiation relation holding between the other constituents of that proposition that it’s true iff Harley is a dog. These responses are similar because both attribute special powers to something (concepts for Frege, propositional relations for Russell) in order to fill an explanatory gap. What’s more, in both cases, there’s not much that can be said about how those things manage to get those special powers: having those powers is just part of what it is to be a concept, or propositional relation.⁶¹

Merricks recently argued that those “special powers” can be attributed to the propositions themselves, rather than to their constituents.⁶² On his view, there’s nothing more to be said about why a proposition has its truth conditions except that it has them essentially. *$\langle \text{Harley is a dog} \rangle$ is true iff Harley is a dog* simply because having those truth-conditions is part of what it is to be that proposition. So, whereas the accounts offered by Frege and Russell for why propositions have their

⁶⁰ Russell (1903) thought that propositions are just facts. The proposition $\langle \text{Harley is a dog} \rangle$ consists of Harley standing in the instantiation relation to *doghood*, which just seems to be the fact that Harley is a dog. Hence, Russell (1903) probably wouldn’t have said that truths are representations, otherwise all facts would be representations of themselves. Here contemporary Russellians do not side with Russell, since his proposal entails that there can be no false propositions.

⁶¹ For both Frege and Russell these are powers related to predication. Frege builds predicational power into concepts, such that the concept *horse* is essentially such that it predicates horse-ness of the object saturating it. Russell builds predicational power into relations, such that the relation of predication is essentially such that when a property, F, stands in that relation to another entity, F is predicated of that entity.

⁶² See chapter 6, section II of Merricks (2015).

truth-conditions bottom out at the level of constituents of propositions, Merricks' account bottoms out at the level of propositions themselves.^{63, 64}

The surface disagreement between these three philosophers concern (i) whether a proposition's representational properties are to be explained in terms of the representational properties of its constituents, where Frege and Russell say "yes", and Merricks answers "no", and (ii) if "yes" to (i) whether the constituents corresponding to names and predicates have representational properties on their own, where Frege says "yes", and Russell says "no". These disagreements do not get to the core of the issue at hand, which concerns whether or not *at some level of analysis* we must make an attribution of primitive representational properties. On this point, all three philosophers agree: each says that some abstract objects possess primitive representational powers.

In order for an abstract object to be a primary truth-bearer, it must get its truth-conditions in one of these ways. Things with truth-conditions are representations: if they represent things as being a certain way, then they're true only if things are that way. So, those special powers partly in virtue of which propositions get their truth-conditions may also be thought of as powers in virtue of which propositions represent the way they do. Frege and Russell invoke *representation-conferring* powers: certain entities have powers such that, when they're combined with other entities, the complex is a representation. Frege, Russell, and Merricks invoke *representational* powers: certain entities (propositions) have powers in virtue of which they're representations. The problems many consider fatal for any theory of abstract primary truth-bearers pertain to these representational (or representation-conferring) powers.

Two of those problems are worth noting here. In the first place, it seems like abstract objects are poor candidates to possess representational (or representation-conferring) powers. Representation is something we most readily see accomplished by mental things (thoughts, ideas, and perceptions, for example), and non-mental things (for the most part, at least) aren't capable of

⁶³ Merricks does not talk about propositions as having special powers related to *predication*, but, in keeping with Frege and Russell, we can see what predicative powers Merricks' propositions have. On his view, $\langle \text{Harley is a dog} \rangle$ has the special power of predicating *being such that Harley is a dog* of the world.

⁶⁴ There are serious problems with the explanations offered by Frege and Russell that weren't touched on here, and that Merricks is able to avoid. These are covered in Soames (2014a) and Chapter 2 of Hanks (2015). There are two reasons that these problems don't apply to Merricks' view. In the first place, those problems can only arise if propositions have constituents, and Merricks denies that propositions have constituents. In the second place, those problems are about whether something can really explain how propositions get their truth-conditions, and Merricks denies that there is an explanation for this.

representing mind-independently.⁶⁵ Indeed, that representation is proper to the mind was a widely popular view in the medieval period,⁶⁶ and it's this verdict that Brentano espouses when he says intentionality is the mark of the mental.⁶⁷ Given that our notion of representation is so closely tied to that of the mind, it might strike us as bizarre (or, at least, surprising) that abstract objects could have representational (or representation-conferring) powers.⁶⁸

Secondly, there's a good reason for that representational (or representation-conferring) powers should not be taken as primitive. Because abstract primary truth-bearers require mysterious powers like these in order to represent (i.e. have truth-conditions), they're usually criticized for representing "by magic".⁶⁹ Of course, the criticism here is *not* that Frege, Russell, and Merricks are committed to a primitive; there's good reason to think this can't be avoided. Rather, the criticism is that they're committed to primitive *representation*. The thought here is that representation *ought to be* analyzable, and this is precluded if something magically represents. This thought is also in keeping with a naturalist research program, for naturalists will say (among other things) that we should strive to eliminate from our ontologies all mysterious, magical, or otherwise "spooky" entities and powers.⁷⁰ To be sure, it seems like naturalists may have to concede

⁶⁵ Dennis Stampe develops a causal theory of representation, which is supposed to allow for mind-independent representation. See Stampe (1977). Perhaps he is right, and some non-mental things can be mind-independent representations. A proponent of the view that there are abstract primary truth-bearers shouldn't take this as a vindication of her own view. That's because her view can't capitalize on any version of Stampe's causal theory (abstract objects can't stand in causal relations).

⁶⁶ See Lagerlund (2017) and Brentano (1995).

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 68.

⁶⁸ One might object that, however surprising, we must admit that some abstract objects have these powers. She'll say that this is just what must be the case for abstract objects to play those three propositional roles. Of course, this response will move us only if we think abstract objects *do* play those roles. What I'm trying to show in this dissertation is that we don't need to assign those roles to abstracta.

⁶⁹ See Putnam (1981), pp. 3-5; and section 3.4 of Lewis (1986).

⁷⁰ It's notoriously difficult to state the substantive position that characterizes naturalism. Indeed, part of the point of Rea (2002) is that there is no such position. Similarly, Papineau admits that "naturalism" doesn't have a precise meaning, and "is not a particularly informative term as applied to contemporary philosophers" (Papineau, 2016). Why is it, then, that naturalists uniformly deny that representation is primitive (and they *do* uniformly deny this; see Warfield and Stich (1994, p. 5) and Fodor (1994, p. 16))? Rea's view is that naturalists all share a research program—"a set of methodological dispositions"—which "treats the methods of science and those methods alone as basic courses of evidence" (pp. 66-7). I take it that this is the rough-and-ready thought: on naturalism, whatever needs explaining can be fully explained in terms of the theoretical posits of an (idealized) natural science; furthermore, if something doesn't require explanation, then it must be the theoretical posit of an (idealized) natural science. (I don't purport to have stated the substantive position that characterizes naturalism, not least because this position probably isn't all that substantive.)

some spooky things (sets, and maybe numbers, for example), and one may say that magical representation is among them.⁷¹ But the naturalist will only feel pressure to accept magical representation when she's exhausted (to her satisfaction) all her other options. Until then (assuming she hasn't already found a satisfactory, naturalist account of representation) she's free to say that representation merely remains unanalyzed, without conceding that it's *unanalyzable*. For naturalists, and anyone else who thinks that representation ought to be analyzable, magical representation is a last resort.⁷²

For at least one of these reasons, some have concluded that abstract objects cannot be primary truth-bearers. Among them, those who think that there *really are* propositions have chosen to give up the traditional theory, which says that propositions are both of these things.

2.2.2 An Inconsistent Triad

Anyone who rejects the traditional theory of propositions for one of the two reasons given will (conservatively) be forced to choose between thinking of propositions as *abstract* and thinking of them as *primary truth-bearers*. This is an unfortunate choice, since we have good reasons for thinking that propositions are both, and each of these reasons stem from treating propositions as semantic contents and objects of belief.⁷³ As I mentioned in the introduction, most philosophers who reject the traditional theory for one of the two earlier reasons choose to give up the primary truth-bearer role. They do this because they're more convinced that propositions are sharable (and

Primitive representation is consistent with naturalism only if an idealized natural science (e.g. a complete physical theory) counts primitive representational powers among its theoretical posits. The thought is that such powers would not appear in an idealized theory. So, primitive representation is inconsistent with naturalism. The second premise is extremely controversial, of course, but that's a conversation for another day.

⁷¹ Van Inwagen (1986) highlights the spookiness of sets and (in particular) set membership. Merricks makes the claim that naturalists should be willing to concede his version of magical representation; see Merricks (2015), pp. 213-214.

⁷² Some non-naturalists want to deny that magical representation is a last resort. They'll say that representation is precisely the sort of thing that motivates non-naturalism in the first place. I take it that this is at the heart of Fumerton's defense of magical representation. See Fumerton (2002), especially pp. 46-47. No one who shares this thought will be moved by this second objection.

⁷³ These are reasons we've already covered. It seems like you and I can assert, deny, believe, and doubt (literally) the same thing, and, among the sharable things, no material object (a tree, rock, person, etc.) could be asserted, denied, believed, or doubted. Hence, semantic contents and objects of belief must be abstract objects. Then, from Frege, we saw that the content of an expression *just is* the primary truth-bearer whose truth or falsity partly constitutes that of the expression. Hence, semantic contents must be primary truth-bearers.

therefore must be abstract) than that propositions are primary truth-bearers. The point here is that any proponent of a propositional theory of content (who also thinks that propositions are representations)⁷⁴ must give up one of the following individually compelling claims:

- (A) **No spooky representation:** either abstract objects can't represent mind independently, or (inclusive disjunction) representational powers are analyzable.
- (B) **Propositions are primary truth-bearers:** semantic contents and objects of belief are among the things that are in the first place true or false.
- (C) **Propositions are sharable:** more than one person can assert, deny, believe, doubt, etc. the (numerically) same proposition.

I'm calling "Abstractionists" those who give up the first claim. Their judgment is that the traditional theory got it right (viz. that propositions play one or more of the three roles identified in the introduction), and, since that theory entails that there's "spooky" representation, (A) must be false. Trenton Merricks is an abstractionist. "Natural Realists" will pick out those who give up the second claim, (B). They're realists because they say propositions exist, and are some type of abstract object. They're called "*natural* realists" because they're unwilling to countenance at least one kind of spooky representation mentioned in the first claim.⁷⁵ Peter Hanks, Jeffrey King, and Scott Soames are natural realists. Finally, I'm calling "Nominalists" those who give up the third claim, (C). They're nominalists (at least about propositions) because they deny that numerically the same proposition can be asserted, denied, believed, etc. Standard medieval theories of proposition are nominalist; in the contemporary scene, Richard Fumerton is a nominalist.

⁷⁴ Someone who thinks that propositions *aren't* representations, assuming a view like that is viable, need not give up any of these claims. A version of this theory is defended in Speaks (2014). Because, on this sort of theory, truth-bearers are not representations, a proponent will have to offer a very different account of truth and falsity. Like Russell (1903), Speaks says that propositions are true iff they obtain. (It's noteworthy that, unlike Russell, Speaks identifies propositions as certain kinds of properties, where false propositions are just unexemplified properties.) It would take me too far afield to defend *representational* theories of truth against *non-representational* ones in this chapter. Suffice it to say (as I do in the body) the forced choice I'll be discussing only applies to you if you endorse a representational theory of truth.

⁷⁵ So, by calling these realists "natural" I don't mean to suggest that they are all *naturalists* (though, I suspect, many of them are). Someone who denies that abstract objects represent mind-independently, but attributes unanalyzable representational powers to the mind would espouse a natural position, but (presumably) not a *naturalist* one. Fumerton and Leftow seem to defend this sort of view. See Fumerton (2002) pp. 46-53, and Leftow (2012) pp. 511-516.

No position here is without its costs. Abstractionists, as we've already seen, must admit of hopelessly spooky representational powers. Natural realists, because they deny that propositions are primary truth-bearers, must reconceptualize the *semantic content* role (lest they deny that propositions play that role, too). Nominalists, by denying that distinct agents can stand in the same propositional attitude relation to numerically the same proposition must explain the sense in which the contents of sentences and objects of attitudes are literally sharable. From this admittedly brief survey, it's not obvious that the nominalist is in the worst position of the three. It's not obvious, for instance, that giving a reductive account of sharability is more burdensome than reconceptualizing the semantic content role. In light of this, it's somewhat surprising that nominalism enjoys so little support.

Even more surprising is that many natural realists don't give the nominalist option much attention *at all*. Peter Hanks and Scott Soames are good examples here: both take it as obvious that propositions are sharable and, therefore, abstract.⁷⁶ Accordingly, both eventually reject the view that propositions are primary truth-bearers. The opening line of Hanks (2015) says, "[w]e use propositional contents, and contents more generally, to identify, classify, and individuate our mental states and speech acts" (1). On the basis of this observation, Hanks makes the following suggestion:

propositions fit neatly into [the] family of classificatory entities. This raises a question about whether we can profitably think about propositions by assimilating them to [a] member of this family. I think we can. We make headway in understanding our practices of identifying and reporting attitudes and speech acts by identifying propositions with types. (6)

Here Hanks is saying that, by identifying propositions with *types* (of predicative acts) we allow for a clean account of how propositions group different attitudes (beliefs, doubts, etc.) and expressions (particular sentence tokens or types) together. For example, this identification explains how a certain proposition can put Smith's belief-state in the same group as Jones' belief-state (when, e.g., Smith and Jones both believe that Frank is an alien): both involve tokens of the same type of

⁷⁶ In addition to these two, the authors of the "Propositions" entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy define a proposition as "the sharable objects of the attitudes and the primary bearers of truth and falsity." See McGrath & Frank (2018).

predicative act. In short, the fact that propositions are used to classify attitudes and speech acts is neatly accounted for by a theory that makes propositions sharable.

A similar thought appears later, when Hanks asks us to consider the following sentences (the numbers are his).

(10a) Clinton stated what Obama stated

(10b) Clinton and Obama stated the same thing

He then writes,

‘what Obama stated’ in (10a), and ‘the same thing’ in (10b) are naturally read as denoting a type, either the statement (action) that Obama performed, or perhaps the sentence type that he produced. Given that propositions are not sentence types, if we use ‘what Obama stated’ to denote a proposition, then we should identify this proposition with the type of statement he produced—a type of action. Propositions are types of statements, assertions, judgments, and beliefs. (72-3).

Of course, Hanks is surely right that those fragments from (10a) and (10b) are *naturally* read as denoting types (whether of statements or sentences). But even if we grant that we’re talking about propositions here, it does not follow that propositions *are* types of statements, assertions, etc. For that, we’d need to add the premise that the natural reading accurately reports the nature of propositional content. Yet this is precisely what’s now at issue; after all, the nominalist admits up front as a cost of her view that these natural readings must be rejected. If we’re looking, then, for an extra reason to trust the natural reading of (10a) and (10b), we’ll have to look elsewhere.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Hanks offers a reason for giving up the *primary truth-bearer* role. He says, “I reject the idea that propositions are the *primary* bearers of truth conditions. This idea is a relic of a Fregean picture of content that ... we must abandon. On this Fregean picture, propositions are out there, with their truth conditions intact, waiting to be judged and asserted.... The truth-conditions of [judgements and assertions] then come from the proposition grasped by the subject. I believe we need to reverse the explanatory order. Propositions get their truth conditions from particular acts of judgment and assertion, which are themselves the original or primary bearers of truth and falsity” (3-4). But this argument fails; Hanks’ criticism is really a version of the first objection to magical representation (from I.1), and not of the more general view that propositions are primary truth-bearers. What’s more, he ignores the (nominalist) option of identifying propositions with particular acts of judgment (which are the primary truth-bearers on his view). The refusal to countenance a nominalist view like that one makes sense if Hanks is already convinced that propositions must be sharable.

The case in Soames (2010) for identifying propositions as abstract objects⁷⁸ is brief, but resembles the first one offered by Hanks.

Since propositions are theoretical devices for tracking acts of predication by agents, why not take them to be *act types*, rather than ... abstract structures ...? (99)

Though Soames does go on to mention a nominalist alternative (viz. taking propositions to be token events of predication), he quickly dismisses it because it entails that propositions can't be shared.

[I]n identifying the proposition *that o is F* with the act type *predicating Fness of o*, rather than with any particular event in which that act is performed, we provide an object to which all agents who entertain the proposition bear the same relation. (100)

Of course, since the question now facing us is whether we really should regard propositions as sharable entities, none of these comments offer much of an answer. Hanks and Soames are right to point out that propositions are used to individuate beliefs; but, of course, it doesn't follow that propositions must be abstract.⁷⁹ Any nominalist paraphrase of sharability-claims (I'll offer one in section 2.3) will bring instructions for grouping (relevantly) similar things together. But there's no denying that the natural realist, according to whom propositions are sharable, will have the most straightforward story, and *this* (I suspect) is what motivates Hanks and Soames to identify propositions as abstract objects.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Hanks and Soames both identify propositions as *types* of cognitive acts (in particular, acts of predication).

⁷⁹ An argument similar to the one's given by Hanks and Soames appears in Buchanan & Grzankowski (2018). There, they argue that propositions are "abstractions from (possible) mental state tokens". Like Soames and Hanks, they start off by acknowledging that propositions are things we use to categorize sentences, beliefs, etc.

⁸⁰ Not all prominent natural realists are dismissive of nominalism because of their stance on sharability. Jeffrey King defends a view on which propositions are complex, interpreted facts (thus qualifying as abstract objects). But this is because he's a Russellian, taking the constituents of propositions to be objects out in the world (people, plants, universals, relations, etc.) standing in a certain relation to each other. In King (2007) and (2014b) he is explicit that he's assuming this Russellian view, and this assumption is what commits him to identifying propositions as abstract objects. The (broadly) Russellian theory that the constituents of propositions are objects out in the world is criticized in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

Be that as it may, natural realism (as I mentioned earlier) has a cost, namely that it requires reassigning the primary truth-bearer role. This is a cost that nominalism does not accrue. So if we're to adjudicate between these sorts of views, one thing we'll need to see is whether this cost of natural realism outweighs its straightforward account of sharability. Both Hanks and Soames think that there are no serious problems with taking away the primary truth-bearer role from propositions. What matters, they say, is that propositions have truth-conditions *in some way or other*.⁸¹ But there's a few good reason to think they're mistaken (see II.1). In the rest of this chapter, I'll be defending a version of nominalism.

2.3 Advantages of Nominalism

2.3.1 More on the Primary Truth-Bearer Role

Until natural realism took the stage, philosophers usually used the term "proposition" to pick out whatever played the semantic content, objects of belief, *and* primary truth-bearer roles.⁸² To deny that propositions play one of these roles is a cost unto itself. This is the second burden taken up by natural realists (in addition to their obligation to redefine the semantic content role). There is, moreover, a third burden for the natural realist's response to the inconsistent triad: natural realists must explain why, of the three propositional roles, it's the *primary truth-bearer* role that must be given up. I'll now argue that natural realists face serious difficulties addressing these last two burdens.

Consider how Soames and Hanks might take up the second burden. They may propose that the content of an expression is a theoretical device for sorting statements, beliefs, etc. into groups. Assume they are correct that we can use mental representation *types* to sort all of these into the correct groups. It's not a precondition for mental representation types to perform this function that

⁸¹ Both say that a proposition's (thought of as a *type* of cognitive act) being true or false is constituted by its (possible) tokens being true or false. This is just to say that, on their views, propositions are derivative truth-bearers.

⁸² Sometimes you'll see propositions get other roles assigned to them, such as *the referents of that clauses*, *the relata of logical relations*, and *the bearers of modal properties*. Loux & Crisp (2017, pp. 118) assign the first two roles (see also pp. 219-220 of Rosenberg & Travis (1971)); King (2014a) and Speaks (2017) assign the third role. Nevertheless, these don't seem to be essential roles in the concept of a proposition. For one, these roles don't usually appear first on the list of things propositions do. (The roles that appear first are almost always the three mentioned in the body.) Second, these roles often don't get listed at all. (By contrast, the three roles mentioned in the body almost always appear.)

they also be *primary* bearers of truth and falsity. Hence, contra Frege, the semantic content and primary truth-bearer roles can come apart.

But neither Soames nor Hanks will deny (nor should they) that propositions are true or false *in some sense or other*. For, to deny this, they would have to deny that the constituents of arguments, the objects of belief, and the contents of assertions never have truth-values. The difficulty is in identifying something which can sort assertions, beliefs, etc. into the right groups while possessing alethic properties *at least* in a derivative sense. Soames and Hanks contend that mental representation types are derivatively true or false (because their tokens are non-derivatively true or false), but I agree with Jeffrey King that this is dubious:

[I]f we grant that [event tokens have truth conditions], would this ensure that the event type of which they are tokens has truth conditions? Perhaps some properties had by all tokens of an event type are had by the type (e.g. perhaps event tokens of Shane skiing and the event type both have Shane as a constituent). But there are clearly properties had by all event tokens of a given event type that are not properties of the type. For example, all event tokens of an agent predicating redness of *o* occur at some particular time. But it doesn't seem as though the event type occurs at some particular time. (King, 2012, p. 91)

Suppose we think of mental representation types as *sets* of their possible tokens. A set of all possible green objects is not itself green. Should we think that *representational* or *alethic* properties are different, such that these properties are shared by tokens *and* their (derivatively) their corresponding type? I'm inclined to say "no": The set of all possible mental state tokens with such-and-such truth-conditions doesn't itself have those truth-conditions. Since it's not clear, contra Soames and Hanks, that mental representation types have alethic properties, it's not clear that they can play either the semantic content or objects of attitudes roles. Nor is it clear what other derivative truth-bearer could do the trick.

Now consider how Soames and Hanks might respond to the third birden (of indicating why it's the *primary truth-bearer* role that should be dispensed with). Let's grant that the *primary truth-bearer* and *semantic content* roles can come apart, for the reason given two paragraphs above. They may point out that the semantic content and objects of propositional attitudes roles *can't* come apart. After all, we can report what we (or others) believe, doubt, etc, and can follow up on someone's assertion with "I believe you" (or, "I don't believe you", etc.). Hence, Soames and

Hanks might say, if we're to give up just one propositional role, then we must give up the primary truth-bearer role.

But it's not clear why we should give up *any* of these propositional roles at all. The natural realist will point out that propositions are not sharable, insofar as you and I cannot assert or believe numerically the same proposition. Fair enough, but why are we beholden to *this* definition of "sharability"? As we'll see in the following section, I prefer to say that two persons share the same belief when the contents of their beliefs perfectly resemble each other.⁸³ I've yet to see a reason for thinking that the semantic content and objects of belief roles demand that sharability be understood in terms of equal access numerically the same proposition. To be sure, natural realists are free to provide such an argument, but that's forthcoming, and it's not clear what such an argument would look like. In the meantime, while the burden of proof sits with the natural realist, the nominalist has the added advantage of retaining all three traditional propositional roles, thereby avoiding the first burden mentioned at the beginning of this section. In the rest of this section, I'll consider two further advantages of nominalism.

2.3.2 Two Advantages of Nominalism

The version of nominalism I'll be defending here is one which identifies *token mental representations* as the things that play the three propositional roles. A few comments about this view are in order. First, it would take us too far afield to discuss the precise nature of mental representations, since none of the advantages I discuss below hinge on thinking of mental representations a certain way. For the purposes of the rest of this chapter, one is free to think of mental representations as, e.g., token cognitive acts (a la Hanks and Soames),⁸⁴ or token mental sentences, i.e. natural signs (a la Ockham, Addis, and Fumerton), or brain states. Whatever your preference here, you may take *those* things as what get picked out by "(token) mental representations", and what (I'll allege) can be assigned the three propositional roles.

⁸³ This is similar to the approach taken by trope theorists, who say that distinct objects share a color when their color-tropes resemble each other, since color-wise resemblance is just what it is to share a color. I'm grateful to Jeff Brower for sharing this with me.

⁸⁴ Assuming, that is, that you can supply a nominalist reduction of *acts*, without eliminating the thing that can bear a truth-value. If this can't be done, then this option (of identifying propositions as *token* cognitive acts) is not available to the nominalist.

Second, token mental representations can't be shared in the way preferred by abstractionists and natural realists. The sort of access I have to my own mental status can be enjoyed by me alone. Hence, if token mental states are semantic contents, and objects of propositional attitudes, no two individuals can assert, believe, or doubt numerically the same mental state. (This should not be surprising, since these fall under the class of things which are notoriously private.)⁸⁵ Third, token mental representations are primary truth-bearers. Their truth or falsity is *not* constituted in part by that of another entity. It remains an open question whether mental representation is something that can be naturalized (à la Dretske) or not (à la Fumerton and Addis).⁸⁶

Fourth, token mental representations play the semantic contents *and* the objects of belief roles. The content of a sentence is a mental representation token, since that token is the primary truth-bearer whose truth or falsity constitutes that of the sentence in question. (So, this view endorses Frege's definition of "semantic content"). They're the objects of belief because having a belief constitutes standing in the right relation to these things. Perhaps mental representations are things that get instantiated by minds (or brains); then one option is to say *belief that p* consists in instantiating a certain mental representation in a believing sort of way; alternatively, one could say it consists in instantiating a certain mental representation *and* standing in the belief relation to it.⁸⁷

There are at least two advantages which this version of nominalism enjoys over natural realism. The first advantage is one of parsimony. The second advantage (which has its own subsection) is

⁸⁵ Both Frege and Russell denied that mental states could be contents (or, the things asserted) at least partly because they are private. The point is made by Frege in *Der Gedanke*; Russell makes it in a 1904 letter to Frege, saying, "[w]e do not assert the thought, for this is a private psychological matter: we assert the object of the thought" (Russell, 1904, p. 169).

⁸⁶ To affirm NO SPOOKY REPRESENTATION (the first member of the triad in I.2), one need only be moved by one of the two objections to magical representation (in I.1). Hence, a nominalist who says that some mental states have *primitive* representational powers might still count as an opponent of spooky representation—just so long as she objects to the possession of primitive representational powers by abstract objects. Merricks' criticism of this position is that it's unprincipled. See Merricks (2015, pp. 210–211). But, by way of response, consider the following remarks from Leftow (2012): "For most of us, it is a datum that minds represent the world, the only question being how. The claim that Platonic propositions represent enjoys no such status.... Minds ... represent; not knowing how does not incline us to doubt it. Not knowing how Platonic propositions represent does incline many to doubt that they can" (p. 516). For the purposes of this chapter, it doesn't matter who's right here. *How* token mental representations get their truth-conditions is not at issue.

⁸⁷ One might object that the notion of *believingly instantiating* a mental representation is bizarre, or artificial. But it seems to me that one will have a hard time avoiding a bizarre (or artificial) construal of propositional attitude relations anyway. At the very least, the proposal that mental representations can be believingly instantiated seems no worse off than the view that propositional attitude relations are primitive ones.

that token mental representations are better candidates for a semantic content role than are the entities proposed by natural realists.

Consider first the parsimony advantage. Any theory of propositions should be open to an account of how we come to stand in attitude relations toward propositions. What, for example, makes it such that I am now entertaining the proposition \langle it's four-nineteen in the afternoon \rangle ? It seems very plausible (probably even true) that I entertain this proposition because of some mental state of mine. (At the very least, it seems that it's something *about me* in virtue of which I am entertaining that proposition.)⁸⁸ Hence, whatever propositions are supposed to be, it's very plausible that we stand in attitude relations to them in virtue of our mental states.

In order for a mental state of mine to be that in virtue of which I entertain a certain proposition, mental states must be at least as finely grained as propositions: there must be at least one possible mental state corresponding to each proposition. For if mental states weren't as finely grained, then no mental state would fully explain why I have some attitude relation to one proposition over another. Moreover, because it's in virtue of mental states that we entertain propositions, those mental states are contentful; it follows that the relevant mental states are truth-bearers, i.e. representations. In summary: whatever a proposition is supposed to be, it's very plausible that we stand in attitude relations to them in virtue of our mental representations.⁸⁹

For natural realists (and traditionalists) these mental representations *express* the propositions to which they correspond, and propositions serve as the contents of those mental representations.⁹⁰ On their views, mental representations have content only in virtue of expressing propositions. On nominalism, by contrast, these mental representations *are* propositions, and they're "contentful" insofar as they *are* contents (or, better, the things that function as contents). On the face of it, the nominalist has the more parsimonious theory: whereas natural realists (and traditionalists) involve *both* mental representations *and* abstract objects in their stories about propositional attitude relations, the nominalist manages to get by with just one of those things.

⁸⁸ For an extended defense of this claim see Addis (1989, pp. 48-51). I hope that a few cursory remarks will suffice here. If I'm entertaining a proposition, P , then this is either in virtue of something about me, something external to me, or both. I can entertain and cease to entertain a proposition without any interesting (or relevant) changes in my environment. This seems to suggest that *my entertaining P* is not even partly in virtue of my environment.

⁸⁹ Of course, I'm talking about *token* mental representations here, rather than *types*. I don't entertain a proposition in virtue of a mental representation *type* (construed as an abstract object); rather, I entertain it in virtue of an instantiated mental representation token.

⁹⁰ This is standard fare among proponents of the representational theory of mind. See Heil (2013, p. 109).

But natural realists (and traditionalists) will say that the nominalist story *can't* get by with just mental representations. They'll insist that mental representations are the sorts of things that *have* content, so it's a mistake to say they *are* contents. Of course, the nominalist reply will be that this simply falls out of what natural realists and traditionalists have chosen to identify as semantic contents. If contents are abstracta, then mental representations could at best *have* them. It's appropriate for the nominalist to "point to" mental representations and say that *those* are the things she's calling "content"; hence, given what she takes content to be, mental representations *aren't* the things that have content. (After all, contents can't have content.)

The core of the objection, however, is that it's a mistake to identify (token) mental representations as contents: they're too poorly suited to play the role. This is why natural realists and traditionalists say that mental representation tokens could at best only have content. It's crucial, therefore, to see whether this is true.

2.3.3 What Qualifies as Semantic Content?

One might get the impression that natural realists and nominalists are talking past each other when it comes to the semantic content role. Though they disagree about what gets called "content", they could (in principle) endorse the same metaphysical picture. Nominalists and natural realists seem to agree that token mental representations are primary truth-bearers; they might also agree that there *are* mental representation types, which sort sentences and thoughts into groups. Their disagreement is over what to identify as the content role. This makes it look like theirs is just a dispute over word-choice.

The appearance is misleading. All sides seem to share a couple of expectations about content: (i) contents should *sort* sentences and thoughts into certain groups, and (ii) contents should explain how sentences and thoughts get their truth-conditions. The disagreement is not about word-choice, but about what sort of thing best meets these expectations. Though far from conclusive, I think there's a good reason for thinking that (setting aside abstractionism) nominalists have a stronger case here.⁹¹

⁹¹ It's hard to deny that traditionalism is the strongest of the three positions on this issue. After all, its candidates for semantic content are tailor-made to excel at (i) and (ii). The traditionalist proposition $\langle \text{Harley is a dog} \rangle$ sorts everything into two groups, viz. the group of entities that represent things as being such that Harley is a dog, and everything else. (Things in the first group all *express* that proposition.) What's more, a traditionalist proposition is a primary truth-bearer; so anything with the same truth-conditions "inherits"

We've already seen that Hanks and Soames motivate their versions of natural realism by highlighting the sorting, or categorizing functions of propositions. King makes a similar move, identifying propositions with a certain type of fact *because* this gives us a principled reason for sorting (certain uses of) sentences like "Michael swims" and "Phelps swims" into the same group.⁹² To put it crudely, a candidate for semantic content should allow us to sort into one group whatever "says" the same thing.

Sorting is not enough: an interpreted sentence token is capable of sorting things into the right groups, but traditionalists, natural realists, and nominalists all deny that interpreted sentence tokens are semantic contents. More to the point: *anything* which represents can be used to sort entities into the right groups. But (presumably) no one would want to say that, e.g., Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* is the content of my thought that Washington crossed the Delaware. What's needed is for the content to also explain why a sentence or thought has its truth-conditions. That is, what something "says" should explain why it has its truth-conditions. This interpreted sentence token, "Washington crossed the Delaware", presumably does not explain why my earlier thought that Washington crossed the Delaware had its truth-conditions. Nor does Leutze's painting explain why that interpreted sentence token above has *its* truth-conditions.⁹³

Given that this is what we're looking for in a candidate for the semantic content role, do token mental representations fit the bill? If they do, are they better candidates than the ones offered by natural realists? Let's take these questions in turn. Since any representation can be used to sort things into groups, token *mental* representations don't face a problem here. The token mental representation of things being such that Harley is a dog sorts everything into two groups: whatever else represents things as being such that Harley is a dog gets put in the first group, and the remainder goes into the second group.⁹⁴ Token mental representations are able to satisfy the

those conditions from that proposition. In this way, traditionalist propositions are necessary for a complete explanation of how things get their truth-conditions.

⁹² See King (2014b, p. 50).

⁹³ The thought that content must play some kind of explanatory role in representation seems to drive Hanks' criticism of Jeff King's theory of propositions. King identifies propositions as facts consisting of entities (properties, people, etc.) standing in a certain relation to each other. That fact has a truth value in virtue of how we interpret that relation. Briefly summarized, part of Hanks' complaint is that interpreting such a fact requires that we already grasp the relevant content. See Hanks (2015, pp. 61-62). In other words, an interpretation *presupposes* content, rather than constitutes it. This objection only gets off the ground on the assumption that contents must play some explanatory role.

⁹⁴ Suppose I'm tasked with going through a box of trinkets, and picking out all (and only) the ones that match trinket-A's color pattern. It seems to me that I could set one trinket after another beside A, and see

explanatory criterion, too: sentences have their truth-conditions in virtue of expressing token mental representations. That is, a sentence's having its truth-conditions is constituted by it standing in the appropriate relation ("expression") to a token mental representation with those truth-conditions.

So far, so good. We may now ask whether token mental representations (at least, the kinds that are complex enough to have alethic properties) are better candidates for the semantic content role than the ones offered by natural realists. When it comes to the sorting criterion, the natural realist has the advantage. If he's Hanks or Soames, then he'll point out that his candidates are *sortal* entities.⁹⁵ There's no denying that sortal entities would do a better job sorting than token mental representations (which, even if they can sort, are not sortal entities). Hence, if we prioritize the sorting criterion, the natural realist may rightly point out that he's got the better candidate.

Things fare better for the nominalist if we emphasize the explanatory criterion instead. To be sure, the natural realists' candidates *can* feature in an explanation of how sentences and thoughts get their truth-conditions. They'll say that a thought has its truth-conditions because it's a token of a *type* of mental representation with those truth-conditions. They'll also say that a sentence has its truth-conditions because it expresses a type of mental representation with those truth-conditions. But, as the natural realist will readily admit, their candidates are insufficient for a *complete* explanation of how sentences and thoughts get their truth-conditions. Because natural realists deny that their candidates are primary truth-bearers, a complete explanation must make mention of those entities from which their candidates get their truth-conditions. Because the nominalist proposes primary truth-bearers as the things that play the content role, her candidates *are* sufficient for a complete explanation of how sentences and thoughts get their truth-conditions. Hence, if we prioritize the explanatory criterion, nominalism takes the lead.

It's hard to say which side offers the better candidate for the semantic content role. A verdict would depend heavily on which criterion gets emphasized, and it's hard to adjudicate between

whether they match in the relevant respect. If they do, they go in one pile, if they don't, then they're put in another. In this scenario (as I'm imagining it) I don't rely on any *type* (i.e. an abstract object) to help me sort through all the trinkets: I'm just recognizing similarities between concrete particulars. If this is right, then particulars can play sorting functions without the aid of types (construed as abstract objects).

⁹⁵ If he's Jeff King, then he'll tell a more complicated story—one that's difficult to state briefly without a fuller discussion of what he takes propositions to be, and how they get their truth conditions. In outline (and ignoring many important details), he thinks that propositions get their truth-conditions by being interpreted, and, whenever we interpret a sentence, we're also (thereby) interpreting a corresponding proposition. King's propositions sort sentences according to which ones correspond to it, and which ones don't.

those without pressing either the view that numerically the same proposition can be believed or asserted by more than one person (natural realism), or the view that propositions are primary truth-bearers (nominalism). But here is a separate reason for thinking that the nominalist position is to be preferred. While it's true that the entities proposed by natural realists are better suited to sort sentences and thoughts into the right groups, token mental representations still get the job done. Types of mental representations, facts, and token mental representations deliver the same groups. Where natural realism excels, the nominalist at least can't be faulted for failing to deliver on the sorting criterion.

By contrast, the natural realist does not deliver on the explanatory criterion. Nominalism excels here because it goes to the source of a sentence's truth conditions. On nominalism, an explanation of how a sentence relates to its content is a complete explanation of how it has its truth-conditions. Natural realism, as we've seen, only offers a partial explanation. I submit: if we're to determine which side proposes the better candidate for the content role, we should not look at how each one handles the sorting function; nominalists and natural realists both get it done. Instead, we should look at how each one handles the explanatory function, where we find that the nominalist enjoys a serious advantage.

Perhaps one will respond that *being better suited for sorting* is more important than *providing a full explanation*, in which case natural realists take the lead. This strikes me as wrong, but I don't have an argument against it. Therefore, while I think that token mental representations *are* better candidates for the content role than what's offered on natural realism, I acknowledge that the case is tenuous. But even if I'm mistaken, I've at least demonstrated that token mental representations aren't *poorly* suited to play the semantic content role.

2.4 Objections and Replies

2.4.1 First Objection (Shared Belief)

Abstractionists and natural realists will demand that the nominalist say something about what it means for propositions to be sharable. Again, both say that a proposition is sharable iff one and the same proposition can be entertained, doubted, believed, asserted, denied, and so on by more than one person. For me to share a belief with someone is for the object of one of my beliefs to be numerically identical to the object of one of the other person's beliefs. Clearly, on nominalism,

propositions aren't sharable in this sense. If a particular mental representation token of is the object of one of my beliefs, or the content of one of my utterances, it's not clear that *this token* could be the object of one of your beliefs, or the content of one of your utterances.⁹⁶

But the nominalist may happily grant all that's been said in the previous paragraph, and point out that she and her opponents merely disagree about what it means for a proposition to be sharable. When called on to elaborate on what it means to share a belief, or to assert, deny, etc. the same thing as another person, she can take her cue from trope theory. Indeed, the problems addressed by nominalism and trope theory are importantly similar. Consider two objects that share a property—both are orange, let's say. When asked what it means for these two objects to share the same color, realists about universals will say that both instantiate (numerically) the same property—viz. orange-ness. That property, according to realists, is *multiply exemplified*. So, according to realists about universals, a property is sharable iff it's multiply exemplifiable (i.e. it can be instantiated by more than one entity). By contrast, when the trope theorist is asked what it means for those two objects to share the same color, she says that they instantiate numerically distinct properties which belong to the same resemblance class. No property, according to trope theorists, is multiply exemplified, but distinct properties can resemble one another. So, according to trope theorists, a property (trope) is sharable iff it can resemble another property (trope).

Now suppose (just for the sake of illustration) that token mental representations really are just properties of minds (or brains). A nominalist may say: two agents share a belief iff they token (or are disposed to token) numerically distinct mental representations of the same resemblance class. Distinct mental representations belong to the same resemblance class when they represent things as being the same way—i.e. when one representation represents things as being a certain way, and the other(s) also represent(s) things as being that way.

⁹⁶ This, again, is due to the privacy that's (allegedly) characteristic of mental phenomena. But, I imagine one could hold a view according to which one of my mental states is an object of one of your beliefs. Suppose one contends that a mental representation, *m*, is an object of someone's belief iff that person believes that *p*, and *m* represents things as being such that *p*. On this view, if you believe that there's a stranger at your door, and I am entertaining a mental representation of things being such that there's a stranger at your door, then this representation of mine is an object of your belief. This does not require you to have any kind of access to my mental states—all that's required is for you to believe things to be a certain way, and for a mental representation of mine to represent things as being that way. A nominalist may be able to leverage a view like this one to reconcile the three propositional roles with the abstractionist' and natural realist's understanding of sharability.

But suppose our nominalist thinks that mental representation can't be magical, and therefore must admit (at least in principle) of a naturalist analysis. Naturalist analyses of representation are usually causal ones: they say that *x* is a representation of *y* iff *x* stands in the right causal relation to something(s).⁹⁷ This is, of course, terribly crude, but we don't need a more sophisticated articulation of the causal theory of representation to see how a naturalist-inclined nominalist would use it to explain similarity between token mental representations. She would say that one mental state stands in some causal relations in virtue of which it represents things a certain way, and a second mental state stands in some causal relations in virtue of which *it* represents things that same way. At least, this is the structure of her reply; a more precise account of the causal relations in question will be provided by her (or an idealized) causal theory of representation.

A natural realist might argue that the reliance on trope theory cuts both ways. While their handling of (the appearance of) shared properties lends itself to nominalism, their analysis of terms that seem to pick out properties lends itself to natural realism. Nowadays, trope theorists say that singular referring terms like "yellow" really do refer to something, viz. the set of all yellow tropes. Why not say, analogously, that terms which seem to pick out propositions (viz. that-clauses) really do refer to something, viz. particular sets of mental representations. In that case, when I say something about the proposition *⟨Harley is a dog⟩*, I'm really talking about a set whose members are all and only those mental representations that represent things as being such that Harley is a dog. But this is just like talking about propositions as *types* of mental representations, since the relation between a type and its tokens is akin to the relation between a set and its members. Hence, trope theory pushes us to adopt a view like that of Hanks and Soames, according to which propositions are *types* of mental representations.

There are three things to say in response. First, even if nominalists take their cue from trope theory in order to explain the appearance of shared properties, it doesn't follow that they must handle apparently referring terms like trope theorists, too. A nominalist isn't guilty of inconsistency just for helping herself to some (but not all) of what trope theory has to offer. Second, it's not built-in to trope theory that singular referring terms like "yellow" and "circular" pick out

⁹⁷ It can't be that *x* represents *y* iff *x* and *y* stand in the right causal relations to each other, since that would mean there can be no representations of non-existent things. (Perhaps, for *x* to represent *y*, it's sufficient that *x* and *y* stand in a certain causal relation to each other, but it's not necessary.) One of the main goals in Stampe (1977) is to sketch out a causal theory of representation on which non-existent things can be represented.

sets. A trope theorist could offer an analysis of these terms that eliminates reference altogether.⁹⁸ Third, the nominalist may concede that that-clauses refer to sets of propositions (or even *types* of mental representations) without succumbing to natural realism. For suppose that-clauses really do refer to sets of mental representations; perhaps surprisingly, it does not follow that propositions are sets of mental representations. After all, propositions are things that play certain roles, and the nominalist contends that sets of mental representations don't (indeed, *couldn't*) play all those roles. In short, the nominalist may say: that-clauses refer to sets of mental representations, but those sets don't satisfy the functional concept of a proposition.⁹⁹ Hence, propositions aren't sets of mental representations.

2.4.2 Second Objection (Ordinary Proposition-Talk)

Suppose that the nominalist delivers on her promise to explain what it means for beliefs, assertions, etc. to be sharable. Still, most everyone (even the nominalist) would agree that it'd be better (all things held equal) if this alternate understanding of sharability wasn't needed. Of course, the nominalist will insist that some considerations (namely, ones about the essential propositional functions) require us to give up this understanding. But abstractionists and natural realists may point out that matters are far worse for the nominalist on this point, for she must concede that *almost all* run-of-the-mill talk about propositions is misleading, since most proposition talk seems to assume that one and the same proposition can be believed, doubted, asserted, etc. by more than one person.

⁹⁸ To be sure, the eliminative strategy is virtually unheard of nowadays, but there are important figures that have tried it (e.g. Ockham). For more on this point see Loux & Crisp (2017, pp. 72-75).

⁹⁹ Hence, nominalists must deny that propositions are the referents of that-clauses, either because they think that-clauses don't refer at all, or because they refer to things that aren't propositions. Though propositions are often identified as the referents of that-clauses, it's not clear that this is one of the *essential* propositional roles. Hence, nominalists can deny that propositions play this role without denying wholesale that propositions exist.

On the other hand, if you think the *referents of that-clauses* role is essential to the proposition concept, then you'll say that nominalists and natural realists both deny that propositions exist, but disagree about what qualifies as the next-best-thing. Suppose that's right: both nominalists and natural realists deny that something exists which satisfies all the propositional roles. Nominalists think it's the *referents of that-clauses* role that doesn't get satisfied, whereas natural realists think it's the *primary truth-bearer* role. Since propositions are far more often referred to as primary truth-bearers than referents of that-clauses, it seems that the things nominalists (not natural realists) call "propositions" best match what was already being talked about.

Consider this: I'm not aware of any other (contemporary) philosopher who is willing to say that there is more than one proposition \langle Harley is a dog \rangle ; there is just one proposition: *the* proposition \langle Harley is a dog \rangle . Furthermore, it's this one proposition that is (or can be) asserted, denied, believed, and doubted by more than one person. At least since Frege, Moore, and Russell, virtually everyone has talked about propositions this way. On traditionalism and natural realism (and to their credit) virtually everyone has gotten the basic story right: there's exactly one proposition that, e.g., Harley is a dog, and it's *that* proposition which can serve as both the content of several people's expressions, and the objects of many people's attitudes.

Unfortunately, the nominalist has to say that all of this talk is misleading. She must say that there is (or can be) more than one proposition that Harley is a dog, that the same proposition can't be the object of different people's attitudes, and that semantic content isn't as sharable as it seems.¹⁰⁰ She might try to ease the burden of this problem by offering some paraphrastic account of run-of-the-mill proposition talk (along the lines of what was sketched in III.1), but the fact remains that if nominalism is true, then almost all philosophers are seriously mistaken about what they take propositions to be like. Rampant error is a very serious cost to nominalism; it's a good enough reason to reject that family of views altogether.

At least, that is what abstractionists and natural realists might say. But it's not clear that the real target of this objection is nominalism about propositions; the same kind of considerations apply to trope theory more generally. Ordinary talk about properties lends itself to realism: we talk, for example, about *the* color yellow, and *the* virtue of temperance. All trope theorists agree that, when we talk about properties this way, we're speaking loosely. Our nominalist just takes this general strategy and applies it to talk about propositions. (Of course, it's fair for someone to criticize this strategy if he likes; but that's a separate issue.) If she attributes error to the multitude, this is no different in principle from trope theorists attributing error to (almost) anyone else who talks about properties.

Again, the nominalist may say that run-of-the-mill proposition talk is really just talk about *sets* of propositions. Consider the following sentences:

¹⁰⁰ The problem for nominalism here isn't just that it says the appearance of content is sometimes misleading. That claim isn't controversial, for there are sometimes cases where we mistakenly think that two expressions "mean" the same thing. Any theory of propositions can accommodate that. Rather, the problem for nominalism is its claim that sentences can "say the same thing" *without* expressing the same proposition.

- (5) It's necessarily true that $2 + 2 = 4$
- (6) Smith and Jones both believe that $2 + 2 = 4$.
- (7) "Snow is white" and "Schnee ist weiss" express the proposition that snow is white.

The nominalist may say that "the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$ " in (5) picks out *a set of* (possible) propositions, and the claim is that all the propositions in that set are necessary truths. She may also say "that $2 + 2 = 4$ " in (6) picks out a set of (possible) propositions, and the claim is that Smith and Jones both stand in belief relations to members of that set. When it comes to (7) the nominalist may say "the proposition that snow is white" picks out a set of (possible) propositions, and the claim is that "snow is white" and "schnee ist weiss" both express members of that set. All of this is consistent with her view that propositions are (at least in this way *like*) tropes, and that ordinary proposition-talk is really about *sets* of propositions.

To natural realists like Hanks and Soames, this will seem needlessly complicated. Why not just say that the sets themselves are propositions, that the relation sentences stand in to them is the *expresses* relation, and the relations agents stand in to them are the propositional attitudes? Of course natural realists can call those sets (or types) "propositions", if they like. But there are two good reasons not to do this; they're the ones covered in 2.1 and 2.3.

2.4.3 Third Objection (Modal Properties of Propositions)

One of the most serious objections to my view pertains to the modal properties of propositions, and is presented with remarkable clarity in Plantinga (1993).¹⁰¹ We can make inroads into the problem by considering the proposition expressed by the English sentence "there are no minds". That proposition is false, but one might be forgiven for thinking that it could've been true, since (arguably) a state of affairs in which there are no minds is possible. But suppose that propositions *are* token mental representations. Then it would seem that we have two unfortunate consequences: first, there can be no true proposition representing things as being such that there are no minds (or, to put it somewhat misleadingly, \langle there are no minds \rangle couldn't be true), since a world in which there are no minds is a world in which there are no propositions, and a world in which there are no

¹⁰¹ In the rest of this subsection, I'll be relying heavily on Plantinga's presentation of the objection. See Plantinga (1993), pp. 117-120).

proposition is *a fortiori* a world in which there are no *true* propositions; second, possibly there are no minds, but it's not *true* that there are no minds (since there's no proposition representing things as being such that there are no minds).¹⁰² Let's review these consequences in reverse order.

It seems obvious that, for any value of p , if p is the case, then it's *true* that p is the case. In other words,

$$(8) \quad (p)(p \rightarrow \text{it's true that } p)^{103}$$

But we now see that the nominalist must deny this, for she thinks it possible that, though there are no minds, it's not *true* that there are no minds. In other words, the nominalist affirms (9):

$$(9) \quad \exists(p)(p \wedge \text{it's not true that } p)$$

(8) entails that (9) is false; hence the nominalist must reject (8). This looks concerning in its own right, and I will have something to say on behalf of the nominalist shortly. But first consider some of the problems that the nominalist invites by affirming (9). Take again the English sentence “there are no minds”; recall that our nominalist is unfortunate in that she thinks a state of affairs in which there are no minds is possible, but also adheres to a view which says that no proposition could be true which represents things as being such that there are no minds. She's committed, in other words, to (10):

$$(10) \quad \text{Possibly, there are no minds and it's not true that there are no minds.}$$

On reaching (10) Plantinga asks,

¹⁰² This is a little tricky, since some will want to deny upfront that there's a possible world in which there are no minds; God is/has a mind, and (plausibly) exists necessarily. Hence, in every possible world there is at least *one* mind. Hopefully one can at least imagine thinking that a state of affairs in which there are no minds is possible. But if not, s/he should substitute “brain states” for “minds” and “mental representations” above.

¹⁰³ We could present the claim as a biconditional— $(p)(p \leftrightarrow \text{it's true that } p)$ —since it's obvious that, if it's true that p , then p . However, the right-to-left conditional isn't important for the objection (nor for my response to it), so I declined to include it, lest it distract from the issues presented by the left-to-right conditional).

[W]hat does she mean, here, by ‘possibly’? Not, presumably, ‘possibly true’ or ‘could have been true’. For consider the proposition [(10)] says is possible: if it is possible, then so is its first conjunct. But on the concretist position, the first conjunct, clearly enough, could not have been true...So the proposition could not have been true after all. But what, other than ‘could have been true’, could the [nominalist] possibly mean by ‘possible’? (Plantinga, 1993, p. 118).

(10) says that a certain proposition is possible, viz. the one which represents things as being such that there are minds, and it’s not true that there are no minds. Plantinga quite rightly points out that, on the nominalist’s picture, this proposition couldn’t be true, since it’s true only if there are no minds, and the nominalist says there are no propositions without minds. It’s not clear, then (at least, not to Plantinga), what she could mean in calling this proposition “possible”.

But this example is meant to expose a more general problem with respect to propositions’ modal properties on the nominalist picture. In addition to asking what it means for a proposition to be (merely) *possibly* true (or false), we may also ask what it means for a proposition to be *necessarily* true (or false). Unfortunately, Plantinga alleges, it’s not clear that the nominalist can give a satisfactory reply here. I will not spend too much space reciting the replies with Plantinga’s criticisms, since I take it that those criticisms are sound, and that another response (not addressed by Plantinga) is required.¹⁰⁴ A brief rehearsal will suffice for my purposes:

Nominalist proposal (Strong necessity): a proposition is necessarily true if it couldn’t fail to be true. *Plantinga’s objection:* this condition is too narrow for the nominalist; she contends that each proposition could fail to exist; hence for any proposition, it could fail to be true because it could fail to exist. Hence none of the nominalist’s propositions are necessary in this sense.

Nominalist proposal (Weak necessity): a proposition is necessarily true if it’s impossible for the proposition to exist and fail to be false. *Plantinga’s objection:* this condition is too broad; it misidentifies some contingent propositions as necessary (e.g. \langle a mind exists \rangle).

Nominalist Proposal (Strong possibility): a proposition is possible if it could’ve failed to be false. *Plantinga’s objection:* this condition is too broad for the nominalist, since she contends that each proposition could fail to exist; hence for any proposition, it could fail to be false because it could fail to exist. Hence, all the nominalist’s propositions are possible in this sense.

¹⁰⁴ The curious reader should have a look at Plantinga (1993), pp. 119-120.

Nominalist proposal (Weak possibility): a proposition is possible if it could've been true. *Plantinga's objection:* this condition is too narrow for the nominalist; there are some possibly true propositions which (according to the nominalist picture) don't satisfy the condition for being weakly possible (e.g. \langle there are no minds \rangle).

There are a few ways that our nominalist can respond to Plantinga's argument; unsurprisingly, not all of them are ideal. One option is to appeal to *divine* mental representations, and assert that those representations exist necessarily. Our nominalist may then simply reject (9) with all its baggage, and affirm (8) instead. If God exists and enjoys mental representations, it's plausible that, for any p , God enjoys a mental representation of things being such that p , and those representations will be true if p obtains. Hence, for any p , if p , then it's true that p . Of course, this solution has some drawbacks of its own, foremost among which is that it commits our nominalist to affirming the existence of a divine mind, which may (though need not) be considered too steep a price. Moreover, the other two families of views (Abstractionism and Natural Realism) are exempt from this commitment, since it's consistent with views in each family that propositions exist necessarily. Hence, on most of the views in those families, (8) is true.¹⁰⁵

A second option for our nominalist is to say that propositions can have truth-values without existing. If so, it's possible for \langle there are no mental representations \rangle to be true, even if propositions are mental representations: it just so happens that the true proposition in question doesn't exist. Serious Actualists say that "necessarily, no object has a property in a world in which it does not exist".¹⁰⁶ So, nominalists who want to affirm (8) without committing to theism might try denying Serious Actualism instead.¹⁰⁷ But serious actualism seems no easier to deny than (8). How can a property be instantiated by something that doesn't exist? If that thing doesn't exist, then there's nothing there to instantiate that property, and this just makes it look like the property isn't really instantiated! Of course, this isn't an argument (or, if it is, it's a question-begging one). But it serves to highlight the intuitiveness of Serious Actualism, and how it would be a great cost to abandon it.

¹⁰⁵ King's version of natural realism is an exception here. He thinks that the existence of a language is logically prior to the existence of propositions. In that case, if languages exist contingently, then so do propositions.

¹⁰⁶ Bergmann (1996, p. 356)

¹⁰⁷ Though, strictly speaking, his general view about propositions (that they're types of cognitive acts) doesn't require him to deny serious actualism, Soames rejects it anyway. He says, "Although many properties require things that have them to exist, some don't. An individual can have the properties *being dead* ... and *being admired by someone* despite not existing.... By the same token, a proposition can ... be *true* ... whether or not the proposition exists" (2014, p. 103). See also (for a sampling) van Inwagen (1977), Fine (1985), Polluck (1985), and Salmon (1987).

The previous two options are evasive responses to the problem at hand, since each tries to avoid saddling the nominalist with a commitment to (9). But it seems to me that Plantinga's objections don't entail that (9) is false. They show, rather, that some straightforward attempts to explicate some modal properties of propositions on the nominalist picture (as is necessary for anyone who affirms (9)) are unsuccessful. It's open for the nominalist to dig in her heels and say that Plantinga's arguments fail to refute (9). As mentioned earlier, criticizing the soundness of Plantinga's arguments does not strike me as a promising strategy; it's better to propose a different explication of necessity and possibility with respect to the alethic properties of propositions:

My contention will be that, while propositions are primary bearers of alethic properties, they are *derivative* bearers of modal ones. A proposition's being (e.g.) necessarily true is not analyzed in terms of that proposition standing in some relation to a distinct representation which represents things the same way; however, A proposition's (e.g.) being necessarily true *is* (partly) analyzed in terms of that proposition standing in some relation to a distinct entity with a certain modal property (albeit, of course, not the property of being necessarily *true*). My position is inspired by the following remarks in Fumerton (2002):

Is there any other way [besides affirming necessary existents] of securing the conclusion that the thought that there are thoughts is a contingent truth? One possibility is to distinguish necessary *facts* from contingent *facts*. A necessary fact is a fact that is a constituent of all possible worlds. A contingent fact is a constituent of only some. Necessary truths are those thoughts that are made true by necessary facts.... The thought that there are thoughts is not a necessary truth because the fact that there are thoughts is not present in all possible worlds. But here one really must worry about taking too seriously the metaphor of possible worlds.... There is only one world and all truths are made true by facts that are constituents of that one world. It is not clear how one could analyze the concept of a necessary fact (as opposed to a necessary truth) within the framework of this austere ontology. (Fumerton, 2002, p. 51).

Here Fumerton is suggesting a view on which propositions are derivative bearers of modal properties: a proposition is necessarily true only if it's made true by a necessary fact, and a proposition is contingently true only if it's made true by a contingent fact. The viability of such a view hinges on an explanation of what it means for a fact to be necessary or contingent. This is a daunting project in its own right, but I can make some suggestive comments here in its favor.

Suppose someone asks why $\langle 2 + 2 = 4 \rangle$ is a necessary truth. Presumably, hardly anyone would answer that it's a necessary truth *because* it's true in all possible worlds. Even if he thinks that p is necessarily true iff p is true in all possible worlds, he does not think that this explains *why* a proposition is necessarily true (lest he think that a proposition is necessarily true merely because it's necessarily true). A more appropriate (albeit difficult) answer, it seems to me, would mention what 2 is, what it means to sum two numbers, what 4 is, etc. It's by understanding the nature of these numbers and the operation of addition that one also understands that 2 and 2 can't fail to make 4.¹⁰⁸ In short: $\langle 2 + 2 = 4 \rangle$ is necessarily true because, given what 2, 4, and the operation of addition are, 2 and 2 can't fail to make 4. Let's say that *2 and 2 making 4* is a state of affairs; we can say that this is a *necessary* state of affairs, because it couldn't fail to obtain; additionally, we can say it's the nature of the 'parts' or 'constituents' of this state of affairs (viz. 2, 4, addition) which guarantee that the state of affairs couldn't fail to obtain.

Now consider \langle there are no minds \rangle , and, for the sake of argument, set aside the divine mind. There's nothing about the nature of minds which guarantees that they exist. So, \langle there are no minds \rangle is contingently false because (a) there are minds, and (b) given what minds are, they could all fail to exist. Let's say that *there being no minds* is a state of affairs; we can say that this is a contingent state of affairs, because it could fail to obtain; however, when we explain why this state of affairs is contingent, our story mustn't parallel the one we told when explaining why *2 and 2 making 4* is necessary. We mustn't say it's the nature of the 'parts' or 'constituents' of the state of affairs *there being no minds* which guarantee that the state of affairs could fail to obtain. Presumably, we want to say that this state of affairs is contingent because *there could've been minds*, but there are no minds in this state of affairs, so minds are not 'parts' or 'constituents' of the state of affairs *there being no minds*. I propose instead that we analyze the contingent falsity of \langle there are no minds \rangle with reference to the contingent truth of \langle there is a mind \rangle . \langle There is a mind \rangle is contingently true because (a) there is at least one mind, and (b) given what minds are, they could all fail to exist. Let's say that *a mind existing* is a state of affairs; we can say that this is a contingent state of affairs,

¹⁰⁸ Here is another example. Assume for the sake of argument that indeterminism about free will is true. A student might ask "why is it that *if determinism is true, then we don't have free will* is necessarily true?". The instructor would be offering little clarity were he to answer, "because there are no possible worlds in which determinism is true and we have free will". The student might just rephrase her question: "why are there no possible worlds in which determinism is true and we have free will?" The student needs to be shown *what freedom of the will consists in*, and how a deterministic world is characteristically one in which the conditions for free will don't obtain.

because it could fail to obtain; additionally, we can say it's the nature of the 'parts' or 'constituents' of this state of affairs (viz. each existing mind) which guarantee that the state of affairs could fail to obtain.

The upshot of this brief discussion is *not* that states of affairs are fundamental bearers of modal properties—rather, the upshot was that propositions *are not* fundamental bearers of those properties. There's some sense, explication of which deserves its own project, in which this table could've been a different color, that I could've had a different spouse, but that I couldn't have been a serpent, or that 2 and 2 couldn't make 5; moreover, that a table could be a different color, etc. has something to do with the nature of the things in question. What makes a proposition contingent (or necessary) is that it represents things as being a certain way, which, in virtue of the nature of the things in question could (or could not) fail to be that way.

If this is correct, then a proponent of (9) need not rely on *strong* and *weak necessity* (and *possibility*) when she gives an analysis of p's being necessarily (or possibly) true (or false). To avoid commitment to a specific metaphysical picture, she can say:

p is **necessarily** true \leftrightarrow p represents things as being a certain way, and, necessarily, things are that way.

p is **possibly** true \leftrightarrow p represents things as being a certain way, and, possibly, things are that way.

Again, neither *necessity* nor *possibility* is eliminated in these analyses, but this is not a problem; *necessity* and *possibility* appear in each analysis because propositions are not the primary bearers of modal properties.

Now consider the following response: the reasons I gave for preferring the above analyses of "p is necessarily true" and "p is possibly true" did not hinge on the adoption of (9). Suppose one thought that propositions exist necessarily; even so he might think that what makes one of those propositions *necessarily true* is that it represents things as being a certain way, and, necessarily, things are that way. Moreover, because he thinks that propositions exist necessarily, he will also think that, for any p, if p, then it's true that p. Hence the above analyses are consistent with (8). Why, then, should we prefer (9) to (8)? The nominalist still owes an answer.

This response, however, strikes me as question-begging. To see why, recall that there's a truth or falsehood iff there's a representation of things being a certain way. So, (8) entails (11):

(11) $(p)(p \rightarrow \text{there's a representation of things being such that } p)$.

It follows from (11) that, e.g., if there are couches, then there's a representation of things being such that there are couches. Now, I'm not aware of anyone who thinks that the existence of couches somehow brings about the existence of a representation of things being such that there are couches. It's more common to say that, for any way things could (or couldn't) be, there's a necessarily existing representation of things being that way (e.g. as being such that there are couches). Hence, it's trivial that, for any p , if p , then there's a representation of things being such that p . I'm not aware of a third way to understand the conditional in (11): either the conditional is non-trivial, in which case the antecedent somehow brings about the consequent, or the conditional is trivial, in which case the conditional is true because the representation in question exists necessarily.

For good reason, the non-trivial interpretation of (11) is implausible, since, when read this way, there are many values of p which on the face of it render the conditional false. Again, the existence of a couch does not bring it about that there's a representation of things being such that there are couches. This is especially clear when we are interpreting this causally—i.e. as the existence of a couch causing a representation to exist of things being such that there are couches. This leaves us with just the trivial interpretation of (11). Unfortunately, we just saw that the trivial interpretation presupposes necessarily existing representations. This is precisely what the nominalist denies. So (8) presupposes (as an entailment) precisely what the nominalist denies. To ask at this point why one should prefer (8) to (9) is just to ignore the arguments that were already given in this chapter for denying that there are necessarily existing representations.

2.5 Conclusion

I hope to have shown that a nominalist theory of propositions (in particular, a theory according to which token mental representations play all the essential propositional roles) is, in rough outline, *just as* defensible as the realist theories currently dominating the conversation. As I mentioned in the introduction, my goal wasn't to try and offer a definitive refutation of those views (categorized as either traditionalist or natural realist ones). In most cases, I was content to highlight points of

disagreement between nominalists, traditionalists, and natural realists, and then offer some reasons for thinking that the nominalist is right. Instead, my goal was to convince you that, whether you affirm it or not, nominalism about propositional content deserves to be put back on the table.

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CHAPTER 3. STRUCTURED MENTAL REPRESENTATIONS

3.1 Introduction

In the last two chapters I defended the view that the contents of linguistic expressions are (token) mental representations. All the while, I did not elaborate on how I'm understanding *mental representation*. This is (at least partly) because the view I defended doesn't hinge on any particular theory of mental representation—the contention is just that those things (whatever they are) play the key propositional roles.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, as I turn my attention toward questions about the 'unity' of the proposition, I'll have the chance to argue for a theory of structured mental representation. The view I'll defend in this chapter is that the mental representations which play the propositional roles are *complex* representations, whose constituents are concepts 'held together' by a relation that I leave unanalyzed.

As I just mentioned, my starting point for this chapter is a bundle of questions about propositional 'unity'. There are three of these questions, and it'll be a requirement for a viable theory of propositions that it provide (or be amenable to) satisfactory answers to all three. In the process of answering these questions, one commits him/herself to a picture of what propositions are like—viz. whether or not they have constituents and/or a structure, and what sorts of things, if any, are their constituents. It's no surprise that, given a view according to which propositions and mental representations are intimately related, answers to the unity questions will have consequences for what, on that view, mental representations must be like. A clear case in point is my own view: since that view says propositions *are identical to* mental representations, an account of how a proposition is unified *just is* an account of how a certain *mental representation* is unified. I discuss the different unity questions in section 3.1.1.

The focus of sections 3.2 and 3.3 is a rival theory of mental representation that's earned some credibility in recent literature about propositions—viz. Soames' and Hanks' view that propositions are *events/acts of predication*. I fill out this picture (adding some complexities as needed) in section

¹⁰⁹ There may, of course, be several theories of mental representation that are inconsistent with this theory of propositions. For instance, a view according to which mental representation tokens are *not* primary representations could not be reconciled to the theory I'm defending, since it's a requirement of whatever plays the *primary truth-bearer* role that it also be a primary representation. Arguments for the conclusion that token mental representations can't be primary truth-bearers may be found in Stenwall (2015) and Collins (2018).

3.2, and then present some serious problems with it in section 3.3. Once we realize that a relation of prediction can't be what holds together the constituents of a mental representation, we'll be ready for my own view, covered in section 3.4. Also in that section, I discuss some objections to the view.

3.2 Unity and Structure

3.2.1 The Unity of the Proposition

Bertrand Russell raises the problem of the unity of the proposition in §54 his *Principles of Mathematics* this way:

Consider, for example, the proposition "A differs from B". The constituents of this proposition, if we analyze it, appear to be only A, difference, B. Yet these constituents, thus placed side by side, do not reconstitute the proposition. The difference which occurs in the proposition actually relates A and B, whereas the difference after analysis is a notion which has no connection with A and B.... A proposition, in fact, is essentially a unity, and when analysis has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition. The verb, when used as a verb, embodies the unity of the proposition, and is thus distinguishable from the verb considered as a term.... (Russell 1903/2010, p. 51)

Often this problem gets glossed as one question about, say, *how propositions get their truth-conditions*. But Jeffrey King showed that the problem consists of (at least) three questions (King, 2009). The first two questions can be extracted with minimal difficulty from the above Russell excerpt, and the third falls out of the first two:

- (U1) What relation 'holds together' the constituents of a proposition?
- (U2) In virtue of what do propositions have their truth-conditions?
- (U3) Why is it that some sets of constituents can be combined to form propositions, but some other sets cannot?¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ King, 2009, p. 258.

Russell raises (U1) when he points out that analysis of a proposition—‘analysis’ is understood here as creating an exhaustive list of its constituents—doesn’t evidence how those constituents are related to each other. Russell thinks that, in the proposition $\langle A \text{ differs from } B \rangle$, *difference* relates A to B. But difference does no such thing in the list: A, difference, B.

The question of what Russell meant by saying that *difference* relates A and B in the proposition is a fair one. At one point, he thought this is nothing more than A standing in the difference relation to B (such that the proposition $\langle A \text{ differs from } B \rangle$ is just the state of affairs of A differing from B). For now, we don’t need to get lost in the details of any particular account of the relation between constituents. Russell’s general point seems (to me) obvious enough: the proposition $\langle A \text{ differs from } B \rangle$ ‘says’ something about how A and B are related to each other. By contrast, the list consisting of A, difference, and B, doesn’t ‘say’ anything about the relation between A and B. We can put this point more precisely this way: $\langle A \text{ differs from } B \rangle$ has truth-conditions, but the list consisting of A, difference, B does *not* have truth-conditions. So, when Russell laments that analysis destroys the unity of the proposition, the unity he’s talking about is a relation ‘holding together’ the constituents of a proposition in such a way that the complex—i.e. the proposition—has truth-conditions. (U1) pertains to that relation holding the constituents together; (U2) pertains to a criterion on a satisfactory answer to (U1).

We’re led to ask (U3) once we start thinking about which combinations of entities can be ‘held together’ to form a proposition. When Russell analyzed the proposition expressed by “A differs from B”, he listed three constituents corresponding to the linguistic expressions: “A”, “differs from”, and “B”.¹¹¹ Presumably, *that* combination of entities can form a proposition; but “A sneezes B” does not seem to express a proposition, suggesting that the constituents corresponding to “A” “sneezes” and “B” can’t be combined to form a proposition. (U3) pertains to another criterion on satisfactory answers to (U1). A theory about the relation which holds together the constituents of a proposition such that the proposition has truth-conditions must rule out the possibility of

¹¹¹ Strictly speaking, we should deny that “A differs from B” expresses a proposition, since “A” and “B” are just placeholders for linguistic expressions (subject and predicate terms); for precisely this reason it’s also misleading to identify “A” and “B” as linguistic expressions. A more accurate replacement of this sentence would read like this: “When Russell analyzes a proposition expressed by a sentence of the form ‘A differs from B’, he would list three constituents, viz. the ones corresponding to the linguistic expressions ‘differs from’, and the two which take the place of ‘A’ and ‘B’.” It seems to me that accuracy would come at the cost of readability, and that no great harm is done by opting for the more readable, albeit more misleading presentation.

nonsense propositions. (In other words, the relation must be one that, in a principled way, ‘holds together’ some combinations of entities, but not others.)

I’ll have more to say in this chapter about (U1) and (U2) than (U3). Beginning in section 2, I’ll be taking for granted that propositions have constituents that are ‘held together’ in a certain way. That is, I’ll be taking for granted that propositions are *structured* entities. It follows that I’ll be taking for granted that there are non-dismissive answers to the three unity questions. But, according to at least one theory, the right answers to those questions are dismissive ones, since (according to that theory) propositions aren’t structured at all. For the rest of this section, I’ll talk about why we should reject this sort of theory.

3.2.2 A Defense of Structured Propositions

I’m inclined to say (against the standard view) that anything mereologically complex is also structured—after all, its parts (/constituents) are ‘held together’ in some way or other. For this reason, any theory of mereologically complex propositions is *eo ipso* a theory of structured propositions. Proponents of this sort of theory are committed to the existence of non-dismissive answers to the unity questions *precisely because* they’re committed to the view that propositions have constituents ‘held together’ such that the proposition has truth-conditions.¹¹² (The view defended in King (2007) and King (2014) is an exception.)¹¹³ Those who deny that propositions are structured entities will offer dismissive answers to these questions *precisely because* they’re committed to the view that propositions *don’t have* constituents held together such that those propositions have truth-conditions. On the most straightforward version of such a view, propositions don’t have constituents *at all* (hence, they don’t have constituents related to each

¹¹² So, I’m inclined to say that the view according to which propositions are sets of possible worlds counts as a theory of structured propositions; this is because, on that view, propositions have constituents (members) related to each other a certain way (viz. by membership in the same set) such that the proposition (the set) has truth-conditions. But, it’s not standard to think of sets of possible worlds as structured propositions; this is because, on the standard conception, a structured proposition has as its constituents the semantic values of the sub-sentential expressions of the sentence used to express that proposition. (the proposition expressed by “the cat is on the mat” has as one of its constituents the semantic value of “cat”). See King (2019) and Keller (2013).

¹¹³ While it’s true that King identifies propositions as complex entities (facts) whose constituents are the semantic values of sub-sentential expressions, he *denies* that these constituents and the relations between them are sufficient to give the proposition truth-conditions. It’s also required that the fact be *interpreted* a certain way (i.e. as being true iff _____). See King (2014) p. 55.

other such that the form an entity with truth conditions). Merricks (2015) contains a defense of this view.¹¹⁴

I'll focus here on Merricks' argument against structured propositions. That argument runs as follows (where "P" picks out an arbitrary proposition):

- (1) If there are structured propositions, then *P's having its truth conditions* is fully explained by P's constituents and structure
- (2) *P's having its truth-conditions* is not fully explained by P's constituents and structure
- ∴ (3) There are no structured propositions¹¹⁵

Were we convinced by this argument, we'd have to admit that either there are no propositions, or that propositions aren't *structured* entities. Set the first disjunct to the side. If we say that propositions aren't structured, we're saying that their constituents (if they have any) and (if applicable) the relation which 'unifies' those constituents don't fully explain why propositions have their truth-conditions. Again, let "P" pick out an arbitrary proposition which has constituents $c_1 - c_n$. Let "p" pick out P's truth condition (whatever that is). P's having its truth-conditions is *fully* explained by P's constituents and the relation holding them together iff there's something which we can put in for $c_1 - c_n$ and R below such that (FE) comes out true:

- (FE) If $c_1 - c_n$ are 'held together' by R, then the entity consisting thereof (viz. P) is true iff p obtains.

Merricks adds the requirement that the things we put in for $c_1 - c_n$ and the relation we put in for R be *non-primitive*. This requires some unpacking. One *could* stipulate of the constituents of a proposition that they're the sorts of things such that, when 'held together' by some relation (pick whichever you like), make the proposition true iff p obtains. Or, he could stipulate that the relation 'holding together' the constituents of a proposition is just the sort thing that, when holding together

¹¹⁴ There are some similarities between Merricks' view of propositions, and the one suggested in Addis (1989). Addis's view is that propositions are a subset of the *natural signs*, and that natural signs are properties (pp. 34-36); the proposition expressed by "light travels faster than sound" is the property *being-the-thought-that-light-travels-faster-than-sound* (p. 83). Natural signs are (on Addis's view) *simple* properties (p. 77); so, like Merricks, Addis denies that propositions have constituents.

¹¹⁵ Merricks (2015), p. 139.

those constituents, makes the proposition true iff p . If these powers (whether of constituents or unifying relations) are primitive (i.e. do not admit of analysis or explanation), then he's offered primitive entities to fill in $c_1 - c_n$ and/or R in (FE). According to Merricks, such primitive constituents or relations can't figure in a full explanation of how a proposition gets its truth-conditions because there's no explanation available for how those constituents and/or relations work the way they do. To the extent that we're missing an explanation at the level of constituents or unifying relations, we're missing a full explanation of how propositions get their truth-conditions (Merricks, 2015, p. 141).

Merricks' book (in particular, chapters 3 – 5) contains a lengthy argument for the conclusion that there are *no* non-primitive entities we can put in for $c_1 - c_n$ and R such that (FE) comes out true. Hence, he concludes (2) is true.¹¹⁶ Here's that argument again, in premise-conclusion form:

- (4) There are no non-primitive constituents or relations that we can put in for $c_1 - c_n$ and R such that (FE) is true
- (5) If (4), then *P's having its truth-conditions* is not fully explained by P 's constituents and structure
- \therefore (2) *P's having its truth-conditions* is not fully explained by P 's constituents and structure.

On what grounds should we accept (5)? Merricks simply stipulates that (5) is true,¹¹⁷ but I suspect he has something like the following in mind: an attempt at explanation in terms of primitive powers is no explanation at all; a fortiori it's not a *full* explanation of how propositions have their truth-conditions. Were we offered (so the thought goes) an 'explanation' in terms of such primitives, we'd be no less mystified than we started: constituents (or a unifying relation) primitively delivering truth-conditions to the proposition they compose looks like a magic trick, and pointing out the trick doesn't make the phenomenon any less bewildering.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Hodgson made a similar point in Hodgson (2012). See especially section III of that paper.

¹¹⁷ See p. 141. It's worth noting that Merricks' introduction of (5) suggests that the premise follows from an earlier argument for (1)—recall (1) said that, if propositions are structured, then there's a full explanation in terms of their constituents and structure of how propositions have their truth-conditions. But this would be a non sequitur, since the case for (1) showed that *only a proposition's constituents and structure* (and nothing else) factor into such an explanation. This is perfectly consistent with the view that constituents or unifying relations factor into the explanation in virtue of their primitive properties. So I read Merricks as merely stipulating (5), rather than attempting a proof for it.

As a *general* complaint about featuring primitives in an explanation, this objection would surely fail. After all, every theory posits a (set of) primitive(s) in which its explanations are supposed to ‘bottom out’. While one may challenge the success of any particular explanation, her complaint should *not* be that the proposed explanation bottoms out in a primitive. *That’s* unavoidable. She may complain instead that the *wrong* primitive has been identified—that the phenomenon which allegedly admits of no explanation is (in fact) something that should be explained. In short, some primitives are acceptable, and some are not; the former (but not the latter) may feature in (full) explanations of a phenomenon. A primitive is acceptable when it’s already intelligible; it’s unacceptable when it’s mystifying.¹¹⁸

It should now be evident that (5) is false. It simply *doesn’t follow* from the fact that only constituents or unifying relations with *primitive* powers can be used to render (FE) true that there’s no full explanation in terms of only P’s constituents and structure for how P has its truth-conditions. The missing condition is that any such primitive would be *just as mystifying as (if not more mystifying than)* the explanandum. Merricks doesn’t supply any reasons for thinking that this missing condition obtains; so, his case for (2) is (at best) inconclusive.

This isn’t the only way to criticize Merricks’ argument against structured propositions. We could instead target (1). That premise sets as a requirement for theories of structured propositions that a full explanation how propositions have their truth-conditions be in terms *only* of their constituents and structure (/unifying relations). In place of this premise, we could assert that it’s a requirement for those theories only that propositions’ constituents and structure *partially* explain how propositions have their truth-conditions. Call this assertion “1*.”¹¹⁹

Merricks anticipates this reply and leverages several arguments to support the stronger claim captured in (1).¹²⁰ But the conclusion of each of these arguments is that the missing ingredient in an explanation for how propositions get their truth-conditions is *not* an agent’s cognitive activity

¹¹⁸ Here I’m using the terms ‘acceptable’ just to mean that a primitive can feature in some full explanation. I’m *not* saying that only intelligible (acceptable) primitives can feature in a viable theory. After all, one might be ‘forced’ by the constraints of his theory to introduce mystifying primitives; though this is a cost to the theory, it doesn’t render the theory inviable. I take it that Merricks would be willing to concede that the primitive representational properties he attributes to propositions are *mystifying* ones; nevertheless, he’ll point out that (given the arguments from chapters 1 – 5 of his book) we must conclude that those are the properties propositions instantiate.

¹¹⁹ Jeffrey King would reject (1) in favor of (1*), since, on his view, a proposition’s truth conditions are determined (in part) by an act of interpretation, rather than just its constituents and unifying relation.

¹²⁰ See pp. 135 – 139.

(here understood as an act of *interpreting* the constituents/relations of the structured proposition). Those arguments would demonstrate (1) if there were no other (plausible) ways to fill out 1*. But there *is* another way. Suppose we explain how propositions have their truth-conditions in terms only of their constituents and structure, and we do this by either introducing a primitive unifying relation, or attributing to the constituents some primitive representational properties. Suppose further that these primitives are mystifying. There's no contesting that we would've failed to give a *full* explanation for how propositions have their truth-conditions. Nevertheless, I contend that this would count as a *partial* explanation thereof.

Let me (briefly) show my hand. My view is that the unifying relation in a structured proposition is one that 'holds together' the subject and predicate constituents such that the proposition is true iff the property picked out by the predicate constituent is instantiated by the object picked out by the subject constituent. This may seem like a mystifying relation; at least for now, let's grant that it *is* mystifying. Even so, were I asked how (on my view), the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form *x is F* has its truth conditions, I would have something to say—viz. that the proposition has as a constituent an entity that picks out *x*, and another that picks out *F*, and these entities are 'held together' by a relation which makes the proposition true iff the thing picked out by the semantic value of "*x*" instantiates the property picked out by the semantic value of "*F*".¹²¹ If a full

¹²¹ Donald Davidson criticizes views like mine (viz. where the meaning of a sentence is determined or generated by the meaning of its constituent terms) near the beginning of "Truth and Meaning". His argument is as follows: "The problem then arises how the meaning of the sentence is generated from these meanings [of the constituent terms]. Viewing concatenation as a significant piece of syntax, we may assign to it the relation of participating in or instantiating; however, it is obvious that we have here the start of an infinite regress" (Davidson, 1967, p. 304). As I understand Davidson, a proposed complex of the meanings of sentence-parts cannot deliver the meaning of the sentence. We may ask of that complex, why does *this* mean (or why does *this* generate the meaning of), etc. A consistent solution would be to stipulate yet further meanings—viz. the meanings of meanings, the complex of which generates the meaning of the meaning of the original sentence. But the same question can be raised of this complex, etc. If I am understanding Davidson correctly, then his argument may work just as well as an argument against propositional theories of meaning more generally, since all such theories propose to explain sentential representation in terms of propositional representation. This is Wettstein's criticism to which I responded in section 1.5.1.

One may also construe Davidson's argument as an objection to *structured* propositions in particular. Immediately following the above excerpt, Davidson remarks, "Frege sought to avoid the regress by saying that the entities corresponding to predicates ... are 'unsaturated' ... in contrast to entities that correspond to names, but this doctrine seems to label a difficulty rather than solve it" (ibid). We may take his point to be (generalizing from Frege's example) that, whatever one picks as the 'glue' in virtue of which propositional constituents are 'held together', that proposal will merely highlight the problem. As we'll see, the relation which I propose holds together the constituents of propositions is called "R", and I leave it unanalyzed. This may seem, at first glance, that I'm simply proving Davidson's point. But first impressions can be deceiving. It seems obvious to me that we're capable of representing things as having certain

explanation of ϕ removes all mystery surrounding ϕ , then (we're assuming) I haven't offered a full explanation of how propositions get their truth-conditions. But I have said all that (currently) can be said, and I've surely said more than just "the proposition *just does* have those truth-conditions". (I'll have more to say about this in section 3.4.2). So, I contend that I've offered a *partial* explanation of how propositions get their truth-conditions.

Endorsing structured propositions—even if we can't fully explain how propositions get their truth-conditions—allows us to explain the compositionality of language in a way that unstructured, simple propositions do not. It seems like what "Cleopatra is a cat" means is a function of what, e.g., "Cleopatra" and "cat" mean (or, more modestly, to *understand* what the sentence means in a context, you must understand what "Cleopatra" and "cat" mean in that context.) Most structured proposition theories explain this by saying that these expressions ("Cleopatra" and "cat") have semantic values, and these semantic values help comprise the semantic value of the sentence "Cleopatra is a cat". Moreover, when used in the right context, the sentences "Cleopatra is a cat" and "Cleopatra is a calico" are both about the same cat. Most structured proposition theories explain this by saying that the propositions expressed by these sentences share a constituent—viz. the semantic value of "Cleopatra". This is the claim that language is compositional: the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meaning of its constituent expressions. That language is compositional makes sense of the observation that (in the right contexts) sentences employing the same subject term(s) are about the same thing(s). Most structured proposition theories have an explanation for why language is compositional: a sentence expresses a proposition, where the constituents of the sentence have as their semantic values the constituents of the proposition.¹²² The ability of some structured proposition theories to neatly explain the compositionality of language seems to me a good reason to think there *are* structured propositions (if there are any

properties, and that this can be done (at least sometimes) without the aid of language. There must be a way that the mind does this, and I hypothesize that the mind does this by joining together modes of presentation in a certain way. Details of how the mind does this can't be determined from the armchair—that's a task for cognitive science.

¹²² The exception here is the view that propositions are sets of possible worlds. Again, as I'm understanding the term "structured proposition" here, that view counts a theory of structured propositions. Since the sets-of-possible-worlds view is not standardly regarded as a theory of structured propositions, most would be content to say that *all* structured proposition theories explain the compositionality of language by positing that the constituents of propositions are the semantic values of sub-sentential expressions.

propositions at all).¹²³ Merricks' argument, I've tried to show, does not undercut this case for structured propositions.

3.3 Predication-Theories of Structured Mental Representation

3.3.1 The Case for Predication-Theories

If there are propositions, then they are *structured* propositions (or so I've argued). At the very least, proponents of structured propositions don't carry the burden of proof. In chapter two, I argued that propositions are token mental representations. So, I conclude that token mental representations (in particular, the ones that are truth-apt) are structured—that is, they have constituents held together by a unifying relation. Recall that, according to Soames and Hanks, propositions are *types* of mental representations. It's worth taking a closer look at their theory of mental representation to see whether they countenance structured (token) mental representations as well. If they do, then we may wonder whether my view can (or should) help itself to one of their conceptions of mental representation. As it turns out, Soames and Hanks *do* seem to endorse pictures of structured mental

¹²³ By contrast, it's not clear to me how someone like Merricks (who affirms an unstructured, simple view of propositions) should explain the compositionality of language. Indeed, nothing is said about this in Merricks (2015). If propositions don't have constituents, what are we to say about the semantic values of sub-sentential expressions (e.g. "Cleopatra" and "cat")? Perhaps the right thing to say is just that these semantic values are functions from contexts of utterance to propositions. For instance, the semantic value of "Cleopatra" (in a context) is a function from certain contexts to propositions 'featuring' Cleopatra in how they represent things. But I'd like to ask *how* we're taken in this story from contexts to contents. On (most) structured propositions views, semantic values take us from contexts to contents by being the *constituents* of contents. Not so on the simple propositions view. That view doesn't seem to allow for the possibility of a full explanation for how semantic values take us from contexts to contents.

I'm assuming here that Merricks is right when he says that simple propositions are primitive representations—there's nothing that can be said by way of explanation for how a proposition manages to represent things as being a certain way. See Merricks (2015, pp. 194-199). In that case, there's no explanation for how <Cleopatra is a cat> features Cleopatra in how it represents things. A full explanation for how the semantic value of a sub-sentential expression takes us from contexts to contents would explain why that value takes us from a context of utterance to a *particular* range of contents. For example, the full explanation would explain why the value of "Cleopatra" takes us from a context to the range of propositions that feature Cleopatra in how they represent things. There's no explanation for how a simple proposition represents things, so there's no full explanation for how the semantic value of a sub-sentential expression takes us from a context to a particular range of contents (over, say, a different range.)

Merricks may reply that his view does not rule out a *partial* explanation of how these semantic values take us from contexts to contents. Fair enough, but the structured propositions view *does* claim to offer a full explanation, and (to my mind) Merricks hasn't succeeded in showing that these explanations are misguided. We should prefer, then, the structured proposition explanation over the partial one(s) associated with unstructured, simple proposition theories.

representation; but I'll reject their version of this picture (according to which constituents of mental states are unified by acts of predication).

Both Soames and Hanks advocate for *act* theories of propositions—ones according to which a proposition is a (type of) activity that someone performs. On these views, propositions are, strictly speaking, things that *happen* (*occur*, or *take place*). Soames and Hanks are led to act theories because they posit that propositions get their truth-conditions from predication, and predicating (like running, telling, or seeing) is something agents *do*. Act-theories are criticized in Searle (1983), King (2015), and Buchanan & Grzankowski (2018) on the grounds that it's a category mistake to say that a proposition is something that *happens* or *gets performed*. I'm inclined to agree, despite arguments to the contrary in Soames (2010, 2015). Even so, I'll merely flag this objection and move on. The more serious problems with predication-theories will apply regardless of whether you treat instances of predication as *events*. Those problems get covered in section 3.3. Here I want to explore how predication theories get off the ground—doing so will help elucidate a valuable insight that my view preserves.

In Soames (2010), we're led toward the view that *minds* unify the constituents of propositions through predication; the starting point is Russell's discussion about the possibility of false belief in *The Problems of Philosophy*. Russell wonders: if belief is a relation between an agent and an object, then what could be the object of the belief such that it's possible to have false beliefs? What, for instance, is the object of Othello's false belief that Desdemona loves Cassio? The object is surely neither *Desdemona's love for Cassio*, nor *that Desdemona loves Cassio*, since (it seems), were there such objects, then Othello's belief would be *true*.¹²⁴ Russell extracts the following lesson:

When an act of believing occurs, there is a complex, in which 'believing' is the uniting relation, and subject and objects are arranged in a certain order by the 'sense' of the relation of believing. Among the objects as we saw in considering 'Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio', one must be a relation—in this instance, the relation 'loving'. But this relation, as it occurs in the act of believing, is not the

¹²⁴ Why not *that Desdemona loves Cassio* (taking this clause as a referring term that picks out the proposition *Desdemona loves Cassio*)? Surely there can be false propositions, so (*pace* Russell) the existence of this proposition doesn't entail that Desdemona *does* love Cassio. This, of course, is the standard answer given by propositional theories, but that's precisely the sort of answer Russell is trying to avoid here. By the time he wrote *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell had (albeit briefly) abandoned the propositional theory on account of the difficulties he faced when trying to explain how propositions are unified.

relation which creates the unity of the complex whole consisting of the subject and the objects. The relation ‘loving’, as it occurs in the act of believing, is one of the objects—it is a brick in the structure, not the cement. The cement is the relation ‘believing’. (Russell, 1912 [2004, 89])

Russell is assuming there that the constituents of a judgment must be the very things that the judgment is about (viz. *Desdemona*, *loving*, and *Cassio*). After proposing that these constituents are knitted together by an act of judgment, he’ll say that, in the case of true beliefs, those constituents are knit together ‘in the same order’ by a distinct unifying relation. Othello’s belief that Desdemona loves Cassio knits together Desdemona, loving, and Cassio in a certain ‘order’; his belief is true if there’s *another* relation knitting together Desdemona, loving, and Cassio, such that Desdemona *does* love Cassio. If there’s no such parallel unifying relation (i.e. if Desdemona *doesn’t* love Cassio), then the belief is false. So, the relation ‘holding together’ the constituents of a judgment is also one which makes that judgment truth-evaluable; what’s more, this relation is something *an agent* contributes.

An obvious question to ask here is *what it means* for act of judgment to ‘knit together’ its constituents ‘in a certain order’. According to Soames, when we reflect on this question, we’re led straightforwardly to the view that agents unify constituents through acts of predication:

In asking this question [viz. ‘what does the agent add to the constituents of a judgment such that the judgment has certain truth-conditions?’], it is important to bear two points in mind. First, what one agent adds to these constituents to bring it about that his or her belief represents the world in this way is *the same* as what any other agent adds to bring it about that this other agent’s belief represents the world in the same way. Second, what any agent adds to Desdemona, loving, and Cassio to bring it about that a *belief* that Desdemona loves Cassio represents the world in a certain way is *the same as* what an agent adds to those constituents to bring it about that an *assertion*, *hypothesis*, or *conjecture* that Desdemona loves Cassio represents things in the same way. When these two facts are kept in mind, the answer to our question is obvious. *What an agent does* in all these cases ... is to *predicate* one constituent of the judgement ... of the other[s]. (Soames, 2010, pp. 64-5)

If we assume, with (Neo-)Russellians (e.g. Hanks, King, and Soames) that propositions have the things they’re about as constituents, then this lesson about the unity of constituents in *judgment* applies straightforwardly to the parallel discussion about the constituents of *propositions*.

Russellian propositions and Russellian judgments *both* have the entities they're about as constituents, so both face the challenge of explaining how those same entities unite to form something with truth-conditions. Likewise, they're amenable to the same solution. Indeed, Soames will say that a judgment (in the previous excerpt) is just *a proposition*; hence, the constituents of a proposition are 'held together' by an agent predicating one of the other.

Soames is surely right that *predication* is the agent's 'obvious' contribution toward Russellian propositions (provided we also grant that the agent's contribution is one which holds the constituents of those propositions together). Take, for instance, the proposition expressed by "Cleopatra is a calico". On the Russellian view, this proposition has Cleopatra (the cat) and *being a calico* (the property) as constituents. In what relation could these constituents stand to one another such that they form something which is true just in case Cleopatra is a calico? The relation in question is *not* instantiation, for then (as Russell suggested in the excerpt from *Problems of Philosophy*) only true propositions would exist. The binding relation must be one that permits of false propositions by preserving the distinction between truth-bearers (representations) and the things which *make* them true (viz. the way things really are). Suppose we introduce some other relation, *R*, which unifies Cleopatra and *being a calico* such that they form the proposition, $\langle \text{Cleopatra is a calico} \rangle$. *R* would be a relation which binds together constituents *x* and *F* such that they form an entity (a proposition) which is true iff *x* is *F*. Whatever relation that gets put in for *R*, it'd be appropriate to say that, in virtue of standing in *R* to *x*, *F* is *predicated of* *x*. This strongly suggests both that predication is the more (or most) explanatorily basic notion, and (hence) that *being predicated of* is a good candidate for the relation which holds propositional constituents together.¹²⁵ Leveraging that relation in this way not only explains how there can be false

¹²⁵ Consider, for example, Jeffrey King's view that the unifying relation is the following: *there is a context c, assignment g and language L such that for some lexical items a and b of L, ____ is the semantic value of a relative to g and c, and ____ is the semantic value of b relative to g and c, and a occurs at the left terminal node of the syntactic relation R that in L encodes ascription and b occurs at R's right terminal node* (King, 2014, p. 56). We may want to ask: why is it such that, when Cleopatra and *being a calico* stand in this relation to each other (viz. with Cleopatra saturating the first blank, and *being a calico* saturating the second one), the proposition they form is true iff Cleopatra is a calico? King's response is that we already interpret the syntactic relation *R* (the relation holding between subject and predicate expressions in a sentence) such that they ascribe (predicate) the property picked out by the predicate term of the object picked out by subject term; likewise, he says, we interpret the unifying relation as ascribing that property of the same object. He says:

"it just isn't coherent to interpret the sentential relation *R* as ascribing the semantic value of ["is a calico"] to the semantic value of ["Cleopatra"], while composing the semantic values of [Cleopatra] and the property of [*being a calico*] in some other way as one moves

propositions (*being hairless* can be predicated of Cleopatra even if she isn't hairless), but also assigns propositions the right truth-conditions: if I predicate *being a calico* of Cleopatra, then that predication is true iff Cleopatra is a calico. (We shouldn't worry that, by predicating *being a calico* of Cleopatra, we'd produce something that's true iff, e.g., Cleopatra is hairless.)

Of course, Soames identifies propositions with *types* of predicative acts. On his view, an instance of predicating *being a calico* of Cleopatra is a *token* of the proposition \langle Cleopatra is a calico \rangle . So, when I say that, according to Soames, the constituents of propositions are 'held together' by an agent's act of predication, I should be understood as talking about proposition *tokens*. All token propositions are, on his view, 'held together' by agents' predicative acts.¹²⁶ These are *cognitive* (i.e. mental) acts (Ibid. 107), with representational properties; hence, they're *token mental representations*. So, on Soames' view token mental representations (at least, the ones that are tokens of propositions) are acts of predicating a property of an object. These mental representations are complex, counting among their constituents the very things (viz. objects and properties) they're about.¹²⁷

up the propositional relation... Semantic values only get composed once in understanding the sentence..., and hence entertaining the proposition.... We either do so in the way dictated by the way we interpret the sentential relation R or not. To do so in the way dictated by our interpretation of the sentential relation R is just to interpret the propositional relation as encoding ascription" (Ibid., 55).

The important point here is that King's unifying relation 'holds together' the constituents of propositions by *predicating* one of the other. (Of course, the relation he identifies does not intrinsically predicate one constituent of the other; rather, it must be appropriately interpreted in order to predicate that way.)

¹²⁶ As far as I can tell, Soames does not say whether he thinks propositions *properly so-called* (i.e. predicative act *types*) have constituents, nor what those constituents would be. If his propositions *do* have constituents, then one could, in principle, ask what holds *those* constituents together. Soames is uninterested in answering this question because, in his view, it distracts us from the core of the unity problem. The "real problem" of the unity of the proposition is "explaining how propositions can be representational, and so have truth conditions" (Ibid. p. 106-7). In effect, Soames dismisses (U1) and gives pride of place to (U2). On his view, propositions (properly so-called) 'inherit' their representational powers (and, hence, their truth-conditions) from their tokens: "[p]ropositions, properly conceived, are not an *independent* source of what is representational in mind and language; rather, propositions are representational *because* of their intrinsic connection to the inherently representational cognitive events in which agents predicate some things of other things" (Ibid. p. 107). On this point, Hanks agrees, and his notion of 'inheritance' (or, the 'intrinsic connection') between types and tokens is more careful: "The fact that types of acts of predication have truth conditions is constituted by the possession of those truth conditions by [their] actual or possible tokens" (Hanks, 2015, p. 76).

¹²⁷ Soames claims that acts of predication are *neutral*, insofar as I can predicate a property of an object without (e.g.) *asserting* or *believing* that the object has that property. To perform merely the (neutral) act of predicating F of x is to entertain the proposition that x is F. The other propositional attitudes are just an added stance we take to the tokened proposition. In other words, on this view, to (actively) believe P is to

As I mentioned earlier, the views presented by Soames and Hanks have a great deal in common; even so, at least two important differences are worth noting here. First, Soames treats *predication* as a primitive notion; accordingly, he offers (by way of illustration) a few examples of predication, but nothing more. By contrast, Hanks describes acts of predication in terms of *acts of sorting*:

Acts of predication are acts of sorting things into groups. When you predicate a property of an object you sort that object with other objects in virtue of their similarity with respect to the property. To predicate the property of being green of something is to sort that thing with other green things. This act of sorting can be done behaviorally, for example, by picking the object up and putting it with other green things, or it can be done in thought, by mentally grouping the object with other green things, or in speech, by saying that it is green. (Hanks, 2015, p. 64)

Analyzing predication this way allows for Hanks to explain why an act of predicating F of x has truth-conditions (in particular, the one by which its true iff x is F). If x is F, then it's *correct* to sort x into the group of F-things; If x is not G, then it's *incorrect* to sort x into the group of G-things. A correct sorting is a true predication, an incorrect sorting a false predication. (Ibid. p. 66) Second, by giving this analysis of *predication*, Hanks allows for the existence of propositions whose tokens are *not* acts of predication: take the proposition <Cleopatra is not stubborn>; according to Hanks, a token of this proposition is the act of *un-sorting* Cleopatra from the group of stubborn things—an act he calls “anti-predicating” (Ibid. 101-2). Like sorting something *into* a group, *un-sorting* something has conditions on correctness (hence, truth-conditions); if Cleopatra *is* stubborn, for instance, it's a mistake to un-sort her from the group of stubborn things.¹²⁸

a) token P, and then b) take an attitude toward P. (See Soames, 2014, p. 97). Hanks thinks that this is incoherent, and argues that propositions (again, predicative act types) have their contents ‘built in’. An agent doesn't make a mistake, he argues, merely by entertaining a false proposition; however, an agent *does* make a mistake when s/he predicates F of x while x isn't F. Hence, (contra Soames) predicating F of x isn't merely entertaining the proposition that x is F (Hanks, 2015, p. 36-7).

¹²⁸ Couldn't it be that so-called acts of anti-predication are really just acts of predicating *negative properties* (e.g. the property of *not being stubborn*)? That seems right to me, but Hanks disagrees. He says instances of anti-predication are distinct from instances of predicating negative properties. The distinction strikes me as tenuous, and allegedly maps onto the difference between uttering “Cleopatra *is not* stubborn” versus “Cleopatra *isn't* stubborn” (Ibid. p. 101). I'm inclined to say that the use of a contraction doesn't (by itself) signal an interesting difference in what the speaker has done by making the utterance. Hanks would rather say that, in one case, Cleopatra is being sorted into the *not-stubborn* group, and, in the other case, she's being *un-sorted* from the stubborn group. Unlike acts predicating negative properties, acts of anti-predication (i.e. acts of *un-sorting*) presuppose an act of predication—viz. the one that's being undone. Accordingly, I anti-predicate stubbornness of Cleopatra if I *deny* that she's stubborn, whereas I predicate

So, in Hanks' view, proposition tokens may either be *acts of predication*, or *acts of anti-predication*.

3.3.2 Predication, Direct Reference, and Unity

I've argued (in 1.2) that we have good reason(s) to think there are non-dismissive answers to the unity questions, (U1) – (U3). Therefore, one way to appraise a theory of propositions is by examining its answers to those questions. It's beside the point to consider how the theories presented in Soames and Hanks answer those questions. (I've already argued in Chapter 2 that those theories are false.) More to the point would be an assessment of how my theory would answer those questions, were it combined with Soames' and Hanks' predicative-act account of mental representation. This version of my theory would say that propositions *just are* those token predicative acts, in which case (U1) – (U3) are questions about how those acts are unified. If the picture permits of compelling answers, then (*ceteris paribus*) we have at least one, respected account of mental representation available to supplement my theory about propositions.

Before continuing this discussion, I'd be remiss to overlook one perk of this token-predicative-act picture of propositions, namely that it gives (or, at least *purports* to give) us a way of identifying propositions with mental representations *without* having to abandon the widely respected view that propositions are *Russellian* in nature (i.e. that they have the things they're about as constituents). It's at least initially tempting to think that a mental representation couldn't have a non-mental constituent; for that reason, the view that propositions are token mental representations might look (at first) like it entails that the Russellian view is false. But a good deal of ink's been spilled demonstrating that, if there are propositions, then they *are* Russellian; for instance, many are persuaded that the Direct Reference Theory is true, which (when combined

not-stubbornness of Cleopatra if I merely say that she isn't stubborn.

If Hanks is right (and we're assuming that propositions are types of predicative acts), then the proposition I express by denying that Cleopatra is stubborn is different from the proposition I express merely by saying that she isn't stubborn. The former would be a type of *anti-predicative* act, and the latter would be a type of predicative act. But I don't think Hanks is right; it seems to me that acts of *anti-predication* are really a sub-type of the acts of predicating negative properties. After all, when I un-sort (anti-predicate) stubbornness of Cleopatra, I sort her into the not-stubborn group (hence, I predicate not-stubbornness of her). Acts of anti-predicating F are just those acts of predicating not-F which 'undo' prior acts of predicating F. If this is right, then there's a way to hold that the proposition I express by *denying* that Cleopatra is stubborn is the same one I express by merely saying that she isn't stubborn. (The difference noted by Hanks, in that case, may just be a difference in my intention behind expressing that proposition.)

with a propositional theory of content) says that the content of a name (i.e. what the name contributes as a constituent toward the expressed proposition) is the *referent* of that name.¹²⁹ On the predicative-act picture, mental representations are Russellian since their constituents include both the objects of predication, and the properties predicated of those objects.¹³⁰ Upon granting that these (token) acts are propositions, one is free to say both that propositions are mental representations, and that they have the things they're about as constituents. (The content, for example, of a use of "Cleopatra" is *this cat* qua object of predication in the expressed predicative act.)

The responses to the three unity questions look straightforward. (U1) asks what 'holds together' the constituents of the proposition. On this token-predicative-act view, a proposition's constituents are held together by the predicative act itself. When I perform the act of predicating stubbornness of Cleopatra, stubbornness (the property) stands in the ____ *is predicated of* ____ relation to Cleopatra (the cat). Moreover, as we've already seen, this relation really does look like one that confers truth-conditions (it looks incoherent to say that, on the one hand, there's an instance of predicating F of x, but, on the other hand, that instance doesn't have truth-conditions).

(U2) asks what it is in virtue of which propositions have their truth-conditions. Again, the ____ *is predicated of* ____ relation does all the work; A proposition of the form *x is F* is true iff x is F; the (token) act of predicating F of x consists of F standing in the ____ *is predicated of* ____ relation to x. Intuitively, when F is predicated of x, that token act of predicating is true iff x *is* F. Again,

¹²⁹ Unsurprisingly, the writings in support of Direct Reference Theory are voluminous. For a small sampling of the most important works, see Barcan Marcus (1961), Kripke (1972 & 2013), Salmon, (1986), Soames (1987), and Kaplan (1989). This is (currently) the orthodox theory of reference for proper names.

¹³⁰ As we'll see, the predicative-act theory requires that these be the constituents of mental representations; but it's not clear that this is Hanks' view. Some of his comments suggest that token mental representations have (token) *referring* and *expressing* acts (rather than objects and properties) as constituents. Consider his remarks about the proposition expressed by "Clinton is eloquent", which he represents this way: $\vdash \langle \textbf{Clinton}, \text{ELOQUENT} \rangle$.

This is a type of action someone performs when she refers to Clinton, expresses the property of eloquence, and predicates this property of Clinton. '**Clinton**' stands for a type of reference act, 'ELOQUENT' stands for a type of expression, and ' \vdash ' stands for predication. Like its tokens, this type of action is true iff Clinton is eloquent (Hanks, 2015, p. 77).

If the proposition expressed by "Clinton is eloquent" consists (partly) of reference and expression types, then (plausibly) tokens of that proposition consist (partly) of reference and expression *tokens*. Of course, Clinton is not a token referring expression, nor is the property of eloquence an expression type. In that case, Hanks' token mental representations *aren't* Russellian, since they don't have the things they're about as constituents.

we shouldn't worry that, by predicating *being a calico* of Cleopatra, our predication might be true iff, e.g., Cleopatra is hairless.

(U3) asks what it is in virtue of which some sets of entities (e.g. Cleopatra and stubbornness) can make up all the constituents of a proposition, but some other sets (e.g. Cleopatra and Harley) cannot. Consider again Russell's multiple-relations view where the constituents of a judgment are threaded together by the act of believing. On that theory, the judgment that Desdemona loves Cassio consists of Desdemona, loving, and Cassio, threaded by the believing relation in the right order, which, if true, maps onto a fact in the world (viz. the fact that Desdemona *really does* love Cassio). But the multiple-relations theory cannot supply an acceptable answer to (U3), since it doesn't have the resources for explaining why acts of belief can thread constituents together only in *some* (not *all*) of their possible orders.¹³¹ In other words, it's not able to explain why Desdemona, loves, and Cassio can, in the act of belief, be threaded together in that order, but not in the order *loves, Desdemona, Cassio*. The token predicative act theory does not seem to face this problem. If one were to raise the worry that Harley might be predicated of Cleopatra, we'd rightly respond that he's confused: Harley is not a property, so she can't be predicated of anything. Similarly, there can be no property *Desdemona-ing Cassio* (nor *Cassio-ing Desdemona*, *Desdamona-ing love*, etc.); therefore, it's impossible to predicate *Desdamona-ing Cassio* of anything. On the token-predicative-act theory (as it's been presented so far), all propositions are of the form *x is F* (with complexity introduced at the level of the constituents substituted for *x* and *F*). If the theory admits of nonsense propositions, it does so by recognizing non-properties as legitimate substitutes for *F*. But the theory *doesn't* recognize non-properties as legitimate substitutes for *F*. Non-properties can't be predicated of anything,¹³² hence nonsense propositions (token acts of predicating non-properties) are impossible.

¹³¹ This is Wittgenstein's complaint in §5.5422 of the *Tractatus*: "[t]he correct explanation of the form of the proposition, 'A judges *p*' must show that it is impossible to judge a non-sense. (Russell's theory does not satisfy this condition.)" (p. 113). See also Stevens (2006).

¹³² There is, however, a predication theory of names, which, if true, entails that this claim I've made is false (since names are not properties). I'm grateful to Rod Bertolet for pointing this out to me. Some say that, "Tully" in "Cicero is Tully" serves as a predicate, such that the sentence "Cicero is Tully" actually takes subject predicate form. Advocates of this view include Boër (1975) Lockwood (1975) and Fara (2015). See also Bach (2015) and Jeshion (2015). My reason for rejecting this view is by no means definitive; nevertheless, it does not seem to me that a *name* is predicated of something in sentences like "Cicero is Tully". Instead, what's predicated (I'm inclined to say) is the property of *bearing the name "Tully"* or *being identical with Tully* (if there is such a property).

The case for the token-predicative-act theory of propositions looks strong. This view leverages a view of mental representation that's already in the literature to supplement the nominalist theory of propositions for which I'd argued in chapter 2. Because it identifies propositions with token predicative acts, it recognizes them as primary truth-bearers (see section 2.2.1). It also preserves the venerable view which I've been assuming throughout this project, viz. that intentionality is primarily a feature of mental states (e.g. mental acts). What's more, the token-predicative-act theory manages to do all of this without giving up the (orthodox) view that propositions (if there are such things) are Russellian—viz. that they have the entities they're about as constituents. Finally, it seems to give compelling answers to the three unity questions. However, appearances can be misleading. While I acknowledge that this view incorporates some of the points for which I'd argued in chapter 2, including the assumption that primary intentionality is distinctive of mental states, I'll argue that the remaining two points *aren't* advantages of the token-predicative-act theory. For one, the theory incorporates Russellianism only by making that view superfluous. Second, the theory *doesn't* give satisfactory answers to all three unity questions after all. If I'm right about this, we should draw the conclusion that the token-predicative-act theory is at best unmotivated, or at worst incoherent.

3.4 Propositions Aren't Predicative Acts

3.4.1 Fine-Grained Propositions and Modes of Presentation

Supposing that “Cicero” and “Tully” co-refer, imagine that Jim believes that Cicero was an orator, but *doesn't* believe that Tully was an orator. Few (if any) would be willing to say that, given that Cicero *is* Tully, Jim is irrational—after all, Jim might not know that Cicero is Tully. Let's grant that Jim merely doesn't know that Cicero is Tully. Even so, he believes a proposition with certain truth-conditions (viz. true iff Cicero was an orator) and *disbelieves* a proposition with the very same truth-conditions. A theory of propositions should allow for an explanation of how Jim—a rational agent—could fail to recognize this mistake. Fine-grained theories distinguish between the proposition expressed by “Cicero was an orator” and the one expressed by “Tully was an orator”. Partly on account of the fact that these are distinct propositions, Jim (innocently enough) fails to recognize that these propositions have identical truth-conditions.

The token-predicative-act theory (as it's been presented so far) is not a fine-grained theory of propositions. To qualify as fine-grained it must not only posit numerically distinct propositions as the ones expressed by "Cicero was an orator" and "Tully was an orator" respectively, but also distinguish between those propositions in such a way that Jim's not culpable for his mistake (viz. his failure to recognize that those propositions have the same truth-conditions).¹³³ The token-predicative-act view satisfies the first condition, but not the second. To see why, note that, according to this view, the proposition expressed by a "Cicero was an orator" is an act of predicating *having been an orator* of Cicero; note also that the proposition expressed by "Tully was an orator" is an act of predicating *having been an orator* of Cicero. Granting that these are numerically distinct acts of predication, how is it that Jim (innocently) fails to recognize that, in each case, the act is true iff Cicero is an orator? Fine-grained theories explain this by assigning different *constituents* to the propositions expressed by "Cicero was..." and "Tully was...". For instance, they might say that the semantic value of "Cicero" (i.e. what "Cicero" contributes as a constituent toward the expressed proposition) is one mode of presentation of Cicero, and the semantic value of "Tully" is a different mode of presentation of Cicero. (Jim's mistake then is merely not recognizing that these distinct modes of presentation are of the same person.) But if "Cicero was an orator" and "Tully was an orator" each express an act of predicating *having been an orator* of Cicero, then there's no difference in constituents at the level of content for these two sentences—the constituents of each proposition are Cicero, and the property *having been an orator*.¹³⁴

¹³³ A qualification: To count as fine-grained, the theory must identify numerically distinct propositions as the ones expressed by "Cicero was..." and "Tully was..." *where "Cicero" and "Tully" co-refer*. (There are obviously contexts where "Cicero" and "Tully" *don't* co-refer, and virtually every theory would assign numerically distinct propositions to "Cicero was..." and "Tully was..." in those contexts, without thereby satisfying one condition for being fine-grained.)

¹³⁴ This presents a serious problem for the token-predicative act theory (as it's been presented so far). That problem can be put starkly like this: suppose again that "Cicero" and "Tully" co-refer, but that Jim doesn't know that these terms co-refer. Then Jim might (rationally and) believingly assert: "Cicero was an orator, but Tully was not an orator". On the token-predicative-act story, when Jim makes this utterance, he performs two acts of predication (which comprise the content of this utterance): first, he predicates *having been an orator* of Cicero; second, he predicates *not-having-been-an-orator* of Cicero. What's more, Jim *believes* both acts of predication. (What believing consists in depends on whether you build propositional attitudes, i.e. force, into propositional content. Soames keeps force and content separate from each other; Hanks builds force into content. See fn 127.) If Jim can (rationally) believe at once the whole proposition expressed by "Cicero was an orator, but Tully was not an orator", then he can at once (rationally) believe a predication of *having been an orator* of Cicero and a predication of *not having been an orator* of Cicero.

An obvious solution is to modify the token-predicative-act theory so that it *does* assign different constituents to the propositions expressed by “Cicero was an orator” and “Tully was an orator”, respectively. This seems to be the strategy Soames and Hanks have in mind in the following excerpts:

The key to all of these solutions will be the identification of the semantic contents of names, indexicals, and demonstratives with semantic reference types. This is neither a Millian nor a Fregean descriptivist approach to the contents of referential terms. The content of the name ‘Clinton’ is not Clinton herself, nor is it a Fregean mode of presentation of Clinton. It is a certain way of referring to Clinton.... The identification of the contents of names with semantic reference types implies that most syntactically distinct co-referential names have different semantic contents. On my account... ‘Cicero’ and ‘Tully’... will be assigned different contents. I have already hinted at the reason for this. It is possible to be semantically competent with the names [‘Cicero’ and ‘Tully’] and yet fail to realize that uses of these names co-refer. (Hanks, 2015, p. 8)

The proposition expressed by [“6 cubed > 14 squared”] ... is the complex event type of (i) thinking of the cubing function f_3 , and the number 6, and *applying* the former to the latter, (ii) thinking of the squaring function f_2 and the number 14, and again *applying* the former to the latter, and (iii) predicating the relation *being greater than* of the result of applying f_3 to 6, followed by the result of applying f_2 to 14. By contrast, the proposition expressed by [“216 > 196”] is the event type of thinking of the numbers 216 and 196, and predicating *being greater than* of the former, followed by the latter... Since entertaining the latter doesn’t require thinking about f_2 , f_3 , 6, or 15, or of *applying* any function to an argument, it is obvious that entertaining [the proposition expressed by “216 > 196”] doesn’t involve entertaining [the proposition expressed by “6 cubed > 14 squared”]. (Soames, 2010, p. 114)

Precisely to address the problem raised at the beginning of this section, Hanks identifies the content of a name *not* with its referent, but with a type of referring act. What a use of “Clinton” contributes as a constituent to an expressed proposition is not Clinton herself, but an act type of referring to Clinton. And, of course, the same goes for names like “Cicero” and “Tully”. Similarly, the token-predicative-act account may say that the contents of names are token referring acts.

But this seems impossible for a rational agent—at least, given the resources so far allotted to the token-predicative-act theory.

Unfortunately, this will not work. On the token-predicative-act theory, the content of “Cicero” (or “Tully”) in the sentence “Cicero [or Tully] was an orator” is the object of predication. Were we to identify a token referring act as the content of one of these names, then *that referring act* would be the object of predication in the expressed act—i.e. the proposition expressed by “Cicero was an orator” would be an act of predicating *having been an orator* of an act of referring to Cicero. This is absurd; the proposition this sentence expresses is about *Cicero* (i.e. it’s predicating something of Cicero), not a referring act. But, if the content of “Cicero” is a referring act, then the expressed proposition would be about that referring act. The referring act is the subject of the proposition because (i) it’s the object of the predication, and (ii) it’s what features in the truth-conditions of the expressed proposition. Let “REF” pick out token act of referring to Cicero, and suppose that REF is the semantic content of “Cicero”. Then “Cicero was an orator” expresses a proposition, which is an act of predicating *having been an orator* of REF. This act of predication is true iff REF was an orator. Hence, it’s REF—not Cicero—that appears in the truth-conditions for the proposition expressed by “Cicero was an orator” if we make REF the content of “Cicero”.¹³⁵ It’s also clear that replacing (token) referring acts with some other substitute for referents as the contents of names won’t solve the problem. On the token-predicative-act theory, the content of a name *must be* the referent of that name, because it’s the content of the name that is the object of predication, and the thing which features in the truth-conditions of the expressed proposition. So, if propositions are (token) predicative acts, then they must have as constituents the objects of predication, and the properties predicated of those objects. Otherwise, the theory can no longer deliver a satisfactory answer to (U2)—i.e. it gives us no way of explaining how it is that, e.g., $\langle \text{Cicero was an orator} \rangle$ is true iff *Cicero* was an orator.

Soames’ proposal seems to avoid this worry. Though the proposition expressed by “6 cubed > 14 squared” has as constituents (among others) the cubing function, and the number six, Soames

¹³⁵ Identifying *token* referring acts as the contents of names introduces a further problem (one which Hanks avoids by identifying referring act *types* as the contents of names). The problem can be presented as a dilemma. Suppose that the content of “Cicero” is a token referring act. Either the same token is the content for each use of “Cicero”, or not. Suppose that the same token is the content for each use of the name. Then which token is that? It seems to me there’s no non-arbitrary answer. Suppose instead that all (relevant) uses of “Cicero” do not have the same token referring act as their content. Then distinct instances of uttering “Cicero was an orator” won’t share the same truth-conditions. One utterance will be true iff REF was an orator, another will be true iff REF* was an orator, etc. We reach an unacceptable result regardless of whether or not we take the same token referring act as the content for each use of “Cicero”. So, generalizing from this example, token referring acts aren’t the contents of names.

is careful to identify the object of predication with the *result* of applying the cubing function to six. Let's say that *applying the cubing function to six* is a mode of presentation of 216. This mode of presentation is a constituent of the proposition expressed by "6 cubed > 14 squared" (entertaining it requires thinking about the cubing function and the number six), but that mode of presentation is not the object of predication. Suppose the same holds for "Cicero" and "Tully"; then the proposition expressed by "Cicero was an orator" would be an act of predicating *having been an orator* of Cicero, where Cicero is thought of under a certain mode of presentation. (Something similar would hold for the proposition expressed by "Tully was an orator"). Let's represent that proposition this way:

$$R_{c,o} \oplus m.$$

("R" stands for the ____ *is predicated of* ____ relation, "c" picks out Cicero, "o" picks out the property *having been an orator*, "m" picks out a mode of presentation of Cicero, and " \oplus " picks out the relation [whatever it is] in virtue of which m is a constituent of the proposition.)¹³⁶ When Jim believes the proposition expressed by "Cicero was an orator", he believes a proposition which has m (a mode of presentation of Cicero) as a constituent. But when Jim disbelieves/denies/rejects the proposition expressed by "Tully was an orator", he disbelieves/denies/rejects a proposition which has n (a mode of presentation of Cicero, where $n \neq m$) as a constituent. Again, in each case it is Cicero, rather than m or n, which is the object of predication. Not only are these propositions numerically distinct, but the difference in their constituents (a token-m in the former vs a token-n in the latter) helps explain how Jim, without compromising his rationality, can fail to recognize that these numerically distinct propositions have the same truth-conditions. The mode of presentation picked out by either "m" or "n" is *how* Jim thinks about Cicero. Though Jim is thinking about Cicero when he entertains both propositions, he doesn't realize that both propositions are about Cicero; this is because he doesn't realize that both m and n are modes of presentation of Cicero.

The difficulty facing Soames' solution pertains to the relation picked out by " \oplus " in virtue of which m (or n) is a constituent of the proposition expressed by "Cicero [/Tully] was an orator".

¹³⁶ I'm borrowing this notation from Speaks (Forthcoming).

Jeff Speaks proposes three ways of understanding this connective, but shows (convincingly, in my estimation) that none of them will work.¹³⁷

a) \oplus is mere conjunction. Suppose for Jim to entertain the proposition expressed by “Cicero was an orator” is just for him to predicate *having been an orator* of Cicero *while* thinking of Cicero under *m*. More generally: for Jim to entertain the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form “*x* is *F*” is just for him to predicate *F* of *x* *while* thinking about *x* under a certain mode of presentation, *m**. Let “*x*” pick out myself, “*F*” pick out the property of *being aflame*, and “*m**” pick out the first-person way of thinking about myself. Suppose I am entertaining some thoughts about myself while thinking about myself under *m**. Meanwhile, I look into a mirror and see someone (viz. me) on fire, while (for some reason) failing to recognize that it’s *my* reflection I’m seeing. If I then form the belief that *that person is on fire*, then I’ve predicated *being aflame* of *myself*, and I’ve done this while thinking about myself under *m**. If \oplus is mere conjunction, then I’ve entertained the proposition that *I am on fire*. But (intuitively) I didn’t entertain this proposition. So, \oplus isn’t mere conjunction.

b) “ \oplus ” signifies an intention. Suppose for Jim to entertain the proposition expressed by “Cicero was an orator” is (partly) for him to *i*) think of Cicero in a certain way (viz. under *m*), *ii*) believe that he can predicate *having been an orator* of Cicero by thinking of Cicero in that way, and *iii*) intend to think of Cicero in that way in part because of the belief in *(ii)*.¹³⁸ More generally: for Jim to entertain the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form “*x* is *F*” is partly for him to *i*) think of *x* a certain way, *ii*) believe that he can predicate *F* of *x* by thinking of *x* in that way, and *iii*) intend to think about *x* in that way in part because of the belief in *(ii)*. But this would result in a vicious regress: for Jim to entertain *p*, he’ll have to have at least one prior belief; but, to have that belief, he’ll need to have at least one prior belief, and so on *ad infinitum*.

c) \oplus is a causal relation. Suppose for Jim to entertain the proposition expressed by “Cicero was an orator” is for him to predicate *having been an orator* of Cicero, while thinking of Cicero under *m*, where his act of predication is *caused by* him thinking of Cicero under *m*. More generally,

¹³⁷ See Speaks (Forthcoming). In fact, Speaks notes that Soames’ predicative act theory should add modes of presentation of *properties* as well as the objects of predication. So, the proposition expressed by “Cicero was an orator” would be more accurately represented by: $Rc, o \oplus \phi \oplus \phi$ (where “ ϕ ” picks out a mode of presentation of *o*). Introducing this complication isn’t needed to appreciate the criticisms of Soames’ solution above, so I’ve declined to include it in the body text.

¹³⁸ Ibid. p. 11

for Jim to entertain the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form “x is F” is for him to predicate F of x, while thinking of x under a mode of presentation, where his act of predication is *caused by* him thinking of x under that mode of presentation. Speaks’ objection, in brief, is that causal relations between modes of presentation and acts of predication *underdetermine* the proposition entertained. Here’s an example: suppose Jim is thinking of Cicero under the mode of presentation associated with “Tully” (suppose he’s looking at a picture of Cicero that’s labeled “Tully”). For some reason, this causes Jim to think of Cicero, and to predicate *having been an orator* of Cicero. Then, intuitively, Jim’s entertained the proposition, $\langle \text{Cicero was an orator} \rangle$. However, the mode of presentation which caused Jim to predicate *having been an orator* of Cicero was one associated with “Tully”. For this fine-grained strategy to work, where \oplus is treated as a causal relation, a mode of presentation associated with “Tully” shouldn’t cause Jim to entertain $\langle \text{Cicero was an orator} \rangle$.¹³⁹

Here’s another way of understanding \oplus , which Speaks does not consider. Suppose “ \oplus ” signifies counterfactual dependence of *predicating F of x* upon a mode of presentation of x. That is, suppose that for Jim to entertain the proposition expressed by “Cicero was an orator” is just for him to predicate *having been an orator* of Cicero, *while* thinking of Cicero under *m*, and where Jim *wouldn’t* have predicated *having been an orator* of Cicero if Jim hadn’t been thinking of Cicero under *m*. More generally, suppose that for Jim to predicate the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form “x is F” is just for Jim to predicate F of x while thinking of x under a certain mode of presentation, where Jim *wouldn’t* have predicated F of x if he hadn’t been thinking of x under that mode of presentation. This would address Speaks’ objection to the conjunction-

¹³⁹ Here is Speaks’ example in support of the same point: “A subject ... sees herself in the mirror. In this case, the subject’s act of cognizing herself in a perceptual-demonstrative way [one mode of presentation of herself] does not immediately cause her to predicate being aflame of *o* [herself]. Instead, that act causes her to (for whatever reason) cognize herself in a first person way [a second mode of presentation of herself]. When she thinks of herself in the first person way, she notices that she is on fire, and so predicates being aflame of herself.... The causal theorist should say, it seems that this suffices for the subject to entertain [the proposition expressed by “I am on fire”]. But does it also suffice for her to entertain [the proposition expressed by “that [pointing to an object in the mirror] is on fire”]? Intuitively it does not. The subject in the second case may never recognize that she is the object she has seen in the mirror and hence may never entertain the thought that the subject in the mirror is on fire” (Speaks, Forthcoming, p. 12). The thought here is that a *perceptual-demonstrative* mode of presentation should, on this causal, fine-grained view cause someone to entertain a *demonstrative* proposition (viz. the one expressed by “that [pointing to an object in the mirror] is on fire”). But the example is one where the perceptual-demonstrative mode of presentation *does not* cause someone to entertain that proposition.

interpretation of \oplus , since, in that objection, my act of predicating *being aflame* of myself is not counterfactually dependent on me thinking of myself under m^* (I just happened to be thinking of myself under m^* while I predicated *being aflame* of myself); hence, despite predicating *being aflame* of myself, I did not entertain the proposition expressed by “I am on fire”. But \oplus isn’t counterfactual dependence, either: it seems plausible that, even if I hadn’t been entertaining some thoughts about myself at the time, I still would’ve predicated *being aflame* of the person in the mirror (viz. myself), despite not thinking of myself under m^* .

It seems obvious that predicating *having been an orator* of Cicero must be in some way dependent on thinking of Cicero under a mode of presentation. However, the same act of predication can’t be so dependent on that mode of presentation that it would be impossible to predicate *having been an orator* of Cicero without thinking of him under this mode of presentation (Jim might come to affirm that Tully was an orator, without realizing that Cicero is Tully). It’s not clear what (if any) relation would capture the right kind of dependence, and therefore be a good candidate for the relation picked out by “ \oplus ”.

3.4.2 Coarse-Grained Propositions and Modes of Presentation

In the face of this obstacle, the act-theorist may abandon the prospect of fine-grained propositions, and hope to find a way to get by with the original proposal from section 2.2—viz. that propositions are just acts of predicating (complex) properties of (complex) objects, full-stop. She will still have to explain how Jim can rationally believe that Cicero was an orator while disbelieving/denying that Tully was an orator, but she’s ruled out that the explanation will invoke modes of presentation as constituents of propositions. If she endorses the type-predicative-act view (i.e. the view that propositions are *types* of predicative acts), then she’s looking for an explanation of how Jim can rationally believe and disbelieve the same proposition; if she endorses the token-predicative-act view (i.e. the view that propositions are *tokens* of predicative acts), then she’s looking for an explanation of how Jim can rationally believe and disbelieve propositions of the same predicative-act type.

Most coarse-grained theories of propositions say that, when “Cicero was an orator” and “Tully was an orator” are both used to predicate of *that man* (viz. Cicero) that he was an orator, the two

sentences express the same proposition.¹⁴⁰ The token-predicative act theory (as it was presented in 3.2) is an exception. It allows for the possibility that these two sentences express numerically distinct propositions (viz. two tokens of the same predicative-act type). What makes the token-predicative act theory a *coarse-grained* theory of propositions is that it doesn't meet the second criterion for being a fine-grained theory: it doesn't differentiate between the propositions expressed by certain uses "Cicero was an orator" and "Tully was an orator" in such a way that would make Jim's believing one but not the other *non-culpable*.¹⁴¹

To explain how Jim can rationally believe the proposition expressed by "Cicero was an orator" while disbelieving/rejecting/denying the one expressed by "Tully was an orator", proponents of coarse-grained theories will also appeal to modes of presentation, albeit of *propositions* (rather than the things those propositions are about). Jim may be excused for failing to recognize someone when s/he's assumed a disguise; likewise, he may be excused for failing to recognize a proposition when *it's* assumed a disguise. Here is how Nathan Salmon introduces this solution:

What is important is to recognize that, whatever mode of acquaintance with an object is involved in a particular case of someone's entertaining a singular proposition about that object, that mode of acquaintance is part of the means by which one apprehends the singular proposition, for it is the means by which one is familiar with one of the main ingredients of the proposition. This generates something analogous to an 'appearance' or a 'guise' for singular propositions.... This unorthodox conception of the nature of propositions and their apprehension

¹⁴⁰ The paradigmatic example of a coarse-grained theory of propositions is the one defended in Lewis (1989), namely that propositions are sets of possible worlds: "I identify propositions with certain properties—namely, with those that are instantiated only by entire possible worlds. Then if properties generally are the sets of their instances, a proposition is a set of possible worlds. A proposition is said to *hold* at a world, or be *true at* a world. The proposition is the same thing as the property of being a world where that proposition holds; and that is the same thing as the set of worlds where that proposition holds" (pp. 53-4). On this view, the proposition expressed by "Cicero was an orator" is the same proposition as the one expressed by "Tully was an orator" because (unsurprisingly) all and only those worlds which are such that Cicero was an orator are worlds which are such that Tully was an orator. A more problematic consequence of Lewis's view is that there is only one necessarily true proposition, and only one necessarily false proposition (since there's only one set of all possible worlds, and only one empty set). The result is that "2+2=4" and "either there is a God or there isn't" express the same proposition, and that "some humans aren't human" and "2+2=5" express the same proposition (intuitively, each sentence from these pairs says something very different from its partner).

¹⁴¹ The mere fact that the proposition expressed by the latter sentence is *numerically distinct* from the one expressed by the former doesn't (by itself) explain why Jim believes one but not the other. After all, if Jim assertively utters "Cicero was an orator" at t_1 , and then again at t_5 , the proposition he tokens at t_5 is numerically distinct from the one tokened at t_1 , nevertheless he believes both propositions.

thus allows for the possibility of a notion of ‘failing to recognize’ a proposition by mistaking it for a new and different piece of information. (Salmon, 1986, p.109)

See also the following from Merricks and Stalnaker, respectively:

I think the above reasons to conclude that Argument C [an argument whose form is *P*, *therefore P*, where “*P*” picks out a proposition] is not logically valid suggest that propositions are typically believed ‘under a guise’ I am inclined to say that those who reject the sentence ‘Tully is an orator’ do not believe the proposition *That Cicero/Tully is an orator* under the ‘guise’ associated with the sentence ‘Tully is an orator’. And this is so even if they believe that proposition under the guise associated with ‘Cicero is an orator’ and so believe that proposition. (Merricks, 2015, p. 44)

When a person believes that *P* but fails to realize that the sentence *P* is logically equivalent to the sentence *Q*, he may fail to realize that he believes that *Q*. That is, he may fail to realize that one of the propositions he believes is expressed by that sentence. In this case, he will still believe that *Q*, but will not himself express it that way. (Stalnaker, 1976, p. 87)

Salmon contends that propositions have the entities they’re about as constituents (he holds to a ‘Millian’ view of names, where the use of a proper name in a declarative sentence contributes the thing named as a constituent to the expressed proposition.) On his view, the modes of presentation of *propositions* are composed of the modes of presentation of the *constituents* of propositions. Merricks and Stalnaker deny that propositions have structure (Merricks goes so far as to say that propositions don’t have constituents);¹⁴² they hold instead that modes of presentation are related (if not identical to) sentences.

It strikes me as uncontroversial that, to entertain a proposition expressed by a sentence of the form “*x* is *F*”, one must be thinking (in some way or other) about *x* and *F*. These ways of thinking about *x* and *F* are (I take it) the modes of presentation mentioned in the above excerpts from Salmon, Merricks, and Stalnaker. (For Salmon, these ways of thinking about *x* and *F* correspond to the ways in which we’re *acquainted with* *x* and *F*; for Merricks and Stalnaker, they correspond to the ways *x* and *F* are presented in sentences.) So, it’s plausible that the modes of presentation

¹⁴² See Merricks (2015, pp. 205-207), and Stalnaker (1976, pp. 79 & 87). Stalnaker’s view is roughly that propositions are sets of possible worlds—they have constituents, viz. *members*, but those constituents don’t stand in (what are standardly construed as) structure-making relations to one another.

of propositions are psychological: entertaining the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form “ x is F ” is mediated by a psychological mode of presentation composed (partly) of *a way of thinking about x* , and *a way of thinking about F* . (Here on out, I’ll refer to these as *modes of presentation* of objects and properties.)

Perhaps the token-predicative act theorist can solve the problem raised at the beginning of this section by introducing psychological modes of presentation of propositions. She may say that there are some uses of “Cicero was an orator” and “Tully was an orator” which both express acts of predicating *having been an orator* of Cicero. However, corresponding to the sentence “Cicero was an orator” is a mode of presentation (ϕ) of Cicero that’s different from the one corresponding to the sentence “Tully was an orator” (φ). So, when someone assertively utters “Cicero was an orator”, he predicates *having been an orator* of Cicero, and does this by way of (i.e. by thinking of Cicero under) ϕ . On the other hand, when he assertively utters “Tully was an orator”, he predicates the same property of the same person, but does so by way of (i.e. by thinking of Cicero under) φ .

More needs to be said: what does it mean to predicate *having been an orator* of Cicero *by way of* a mode of presentation? Are we not confronted with all the same problems which befell the fine-grained strategy in 3.3.1? It’s surely not enough to entertain the proposition expressed by “Cicero was an orator” that someone be thinking of Cicero under ϕ (and thinking of *having been an orator* under its own mode of presentation). After all, I might be thinking of Cicero under ϕ (and *having been an orator* under its own mode of presentation) without entertaining the proposition expressed by “Cicero was an orator”. It seems that what’s needed is that I think of Cicero *as* having been an orator. In other words, the mode of presentation under which I think about Cicero must stand in a certain relation to the mode of presentation under which I think about the property *having been an orator*—viz. they must stand in a relation in virtue of which Cicero is thought of as instantiating the property *having been an orator*. The picture, in short, must play out like this: by *i*) thinking of Cicero under a mode of presentation, *ii*) thinking of the property *having been an orator* under a distinct mode of presentation, and *iii*) relating those modes of presentation in such a way that we are thinking of Cicero as instantiating the property of *having been an orator*, we are able to entertain the proposition, \langle Cicero was an orator \rangle , i.e. to predicate *having been an orator* of Cicero.^s

It should be clear now why this coarse-grained solution fails. Thinking of Cicero as having been an orator is supposed to be analyzed in terms of standing in a relation to a proposition. Not so on this solution, since the ability to think of Cicero as having been an orator is logically prior

to the act of predicating *having been an orator* of that person. The proposition, *‘Cicero was an orator’* is an act of predicating *having been an orator* of Cicero; the relata of this predication are Cicero (the person) and *having been an orator* (the property), respectively. But *thinking of Cicero as having been an orator* is accomplished by relating modes of presentation of that person and that property in a certain way, and, on the coarse-grained version of the predicative-act theory, these modes of presentation don’t factor into that proposition. So, we can’t introduce modes of presentation of propositions without abandoning the propositional analysis of thought (i.e. what it is to think that *p*); but I’ve argued (in Chapter 2) that this analysis is essential to a propositional theory of content; so we can’t introduce modes of presentation of propositions to solve the problem raised at the beginning of this section.¹⁴³

Suppose we denied that *thinking of Cicero as having been an orator* is logically prior to the act of predicating that property of that person, and proposed (instead) that *thinking of Cicero as having been an orator* (i.e. relating a mode of presentation of Cicero and a mode of presentation of the property *having been an orator* in the right way) *just is* predicating that property of that person. The proposal here is that *predicating F of x* should be analyzed in terms of relating modes of presentation in a certain, appropriate way. This seems to be on the right track (see section 3.4), but it undermines the very predicative-act theory it’s supposed to rescue. The predicative act theory

¹⁴³ While the intended target of this objection is the group of predicative-act theories of propositions, the objection seems to apply to any coarse-grained theory of propositions. So long as, on that coarse-grained theory, it’s fair to say that the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form “*x is F*” can’t be entertained except by thinking of *x* and *F* under certain modes of presentation, the theory is vulnerable to my criticism above. How convincing you take this argument to be depends at least partly on your willingness to renegotiate what it takes to *think that x is F*. You may, for example, insist that, strictly speaking, the content of my thought is something that can also serve as the content of someone else’s thought; in that case, the content of a thought must be a publicly accessible entity, rather than tokenings of properly related psychological modes of presentation.

Three comments on this. *First*, Even were I to grant that this response works for some coarse-grained theories, it won’t work for the token-predicative-act account that’s being discussed here. For the token-predicative-act theory has shirked the requirement that propositions are sharable. This response cuts against the token-predicative-act theories as much as it cuts against my objection. *Second*, I’ve already argued (in Chapter 2) that we *should* shirk the requirement that propositions are sharable. When we take on board the thought that only mental things are primary representations (i.e. only mental things possess representational properties in a non-derivative way), we can’t coherently attribute to propositions *both* the primary truth-bearer role, *and* the feature of sharability. But propositions, I contended, are identified by the roles they perform. So, we should retain the primary truth-bearer role, and abandon the sharability feature.

Third, it might be that this response begs the question by stipulating that the content of thought must be sharable. What my objection seems to show is that it’s possible to think of Cicero (under a mode of presentation) as having been an orator *without appeal to publicly accessible content*.

says that propositions (or tokens of propositions) have the entities they're about (properties and particulars) as constituents, standing in the ____ *is predicated of* ____ relation to one another. However, given the analysis proposed in this paragraph, what this really amounts to is a mode of presentation standing in a certain relation to another mode of presentation (and this relation is *not* the ____ *is predicated of* ____ relation; see the criticism of Hanks' view in section 3.3.1). Hence, on this proposal, propositions aren't predicative-acts after all.

Finally, suppose we gave the fine-grained approach to the predicative-act theory another try. Suppose we argued that the proposition expressed by "Cicero was an orator" has as constituents, Cicero, the property *having been an orator*, along with a mode of presentation of Cicero, and a mode of presentation of the property *having been an orator*, where Cicero is related to that property by the ____ *is predicated of* ____ relation, and the mode of presentation of Cicero is related to the mode of presentation of *having been an orator* by that relation in virtue of which Cicero is thought of as having been an orator. Let " ϕ " pick out a mode of presentation of the property *having been an orator*, and let " R^* " pick out that property which holds together the two modes of presentation. Then, on this revised fine-grained predicative-act theory, the proposition, \langle Cicero was an orator \rangle can be represented as follows:

$$R_{c,o} \oplus R^*_{\phi,\phi}$$

But regardless of what " \oplus " picks out, this looks like a needlessly complicated analysis of the proposition in question. Given that ϕ standing in R^* to ϕ suffices for thinking of Cicero as having been an orator, what need is there for Cicero standing in the ____ *is predicated of* ____ relation to *having been an orator*? Because this fine-grained solution declines to identify *predicating having been an orator of Cicero* with $R^*_{\phi,\phi}$, but *does* identify (tokening) $R^*_{\phi,\phi}$ with *thinking of Cicero as having been an orator*, it's vulnerable to the objection from a couple paragraphs earlier—viz. that the act of predicating *having been an orator of Cicero* is gratuitous, and therefore not (part of) the proposition expressed by "Cicero was an orator".

Of course, a theory of propositions *must* explain how, e.g., Jim can be rational in believing that Cicero was an orator, while disbelieving/doubting/denying that Tully was an orator. We've seen now that no fine-grained solution can help a predicative-act theory of propositions to explain how this is possible; we've also seen that no *coarse*-grained solution can help a predicative-act theory

to explain how this is possible. But then we're out of options—the predicative-act theory can't explain how Jim can be rational in believing that Cicero was an orator while disbelieving/doubting/denying that Tully was an orator. So, predicative-act theories are false.

3.5 Propositions are Modes of Presentation

3.5.1 An Analysis of Predication?

I've argued that token mental representations are *not* token acts of predication. It's a consequence of this argument, and the ones from chapters 1 and 2, that *propositions* are *not* token acts of predication. However, the discussion above doesn't leave us in the dark about the nature of mental representations. An alternative picture suggested itself during my criticism of the coarse-grained view in section 3.3.2. Recall that the penultimate proposal in that section was to analyze acts of predication in terms of properly related modes of presentation. Let's continue to use "R*" to pick out the relation holding together those modes of presentation. Furthermore, let "m" stand for a mode of presentation of some concrete particular, x, and let "n" stand for a mode of presentation of some property, F. The proposal was that predicating F of x is just tokening m and n, where m stands in R* to n. On this view, a proposition expressed by a sentence of the form "x is F" can be represented as follows:

R*m,n

If this is how predication is to be analyzed, then R* is the relation such that the complex formed of R* and its two relata is true iff the object of the first relatum instantiates the property of the object of the second relata. This may seem like a strange (perhaps unduly mysterious) relation, but note the following three points. *First*, this relation doesn't seem much more complicated than predication: The ___ *is predicated of* ___ relation is the relation such that the complex formed of that relation and its two relata is true iff (a) it exists, and (b) the right-hand relatum instantiates the left-hand relatum. The only difference is that, in R*, it's the *objects* of the relata (viz. the objects of the modes of presentation) that must be related by instantiation rather than the relata themselves. *Second*, this relation is already appealed to (albeit unintentionally) in the literature (recall Hanks' view that the constituents of predicative acts are referring expressions). *Third*, consider the

sentence “Cleopatra is stubborn”. The function of “is” here is to signal that the referent of “Cleopatra” instantiates the property picked out by “stubborn”. So, the sentential relation ____ is ____ (where “is” is predicative) is a relation such that the sentence formed by populating the left and right nodes of the relation is true iff the thing picked out by left-hand relatum instantiates the property picked out by the right-hand relatum. If this sentential relation strikes us as intelligible, then, it seems to me, so should R^* .

Even so, I propose to leave open whether *relating modes of presentation by R^** is an analysis of predication. I’m inclined to agree with Hanks that, if I predicate F of x , when x is not F , then I’ve done something wrong, whereas I don’t do anything wrong merely by entertaining a false proposition. (So, despite leaving it open for the purposes of this chapter, I *don’t* think predication should be analyzed in terms of modes of presentation related by R^* .) Let me say a little more about this. It’s tempting to think that error is introduced at the level of *judgments about* false predications, rather than at the level of those predications themselves. One could noncommittally predicate a property of an object; perhaps in order to consider what might follow from this predication *were it the case that the predication was correct*. This may be what we sometimes do when carrying out thought experiments, or when we set up a reductio argument. Suppose someone presents a reductio argument, where the reductio assumption is a proposition, p , of the form x is F . Suppose further that p is false. We would not want to say that the person presenting this argument has done something wrong when presenting the reductio assumption, given that the assumption is a false predication (i.e. an instance of predicating a property of an object, where, in fact, the object doesn’t instantiate that property). Otherwise, anyone who presents a sound reductio argument can’t help but make a mistake. Intuitively, a mistake arises when someone *commits himself to* the false predication—i.e., when he judges of the predication that it’s true.

Of course, we *don’t* want to say that someone makes a mistake when she presents an assumption for reductio and that reductio assumption really is false. But this is what we *have to* say if the reductio assumption is an act of predication. If it turns out that x is not F , then it’s *incorrect* to predicate F of x . If (following Hanks) predicative acts are acts of sorting, then it’s wrong to put x in the F -group when, as it turns out, x isn’t F (after all, x *doesn’t belong* in that group). The only recourse for my opponent on this point is to say that the wrongness of a particular act of predication merely reduces to the falsity of the act, such that “it’s wrong to predicate F of x ” is just to say “the act of predicating F of x is false”. But this reduction is untenable, for the

wrongness in question is the sense in which the act of predication is a ‘bad move’. By contrast, merely entertaining a false proposition, or introducing a false proposition as a *reductio* assumption is not a bad move. What *does* seem like a bad move is asserting/believing/committing to a false proposition (i.e. to assertively utter that *x* is *F*, when *x* is not *F*). Given that mere acts of predication can qualify as ‘bad moves’ in this sense shows that these acts have force (e.g. the attitude corresponding to *asserting*) built-in. In other words, we can’t predicate *F* of *x* without thereby *asserting that x is F*.

If *predicating F of x* involves (or, is identical to) *asserting/believing that x is F*, then we should deny that predication can be (completely) analyzed in terms of relating modes of presentation by *R**. For I contend that it’s by tokening modes of presentation related by *R** that we come to entertain a thought, and we can entertain (or express) a thought without believing (or asserting) it.

144, 145

3.5.2 The Unity of the Proposition (Again)

As I mentioned above (section 3.2.2), one way to appraise a theory of structured propositions is by the answers it gives to the three unity questions from section 3.1.1. It turned out that the token predicative act theory does not give satisfactory answers to those three questions (namely, because it doesn’t give a satisfactory answer to U1, on account of the fact that it misidentifies *predication* as the relation holding together a proposition’s constituents). Perhaps the alternative picture which emerged can do better. I think it can. Start with (U1). This alternative theory says that the

¹⁴⁴ This is not to say that modes of presentation ‘held together’ by *R** can’t feature in a complete analysis of predication. It may be, for instance, that *predicating F of x* amounts to tokening a mode of presentation of *x* and *F* held together by *R**, coupled with an appropriate propositional attitude (e.g. *belief*).

¹⁴⁵ There’s an interesting way to concede the observation that false predications are ‘bad moves’ while holding onto the proposed analysis of predication in terms of properly related modes of presentation. One could just admit that acts of predication have force built-in, and that the same goes for tokening modes of presentation related by *R**. Someone who takes this approach would just deny that there’s such a thing as ‘mere’ entertainment of a proposition (this is Hanks’ view, see fn 127, above). What distinguishes ‘entertaining’ a proposition from, say, *believing* or *denying* it, is a *cancellation context* which obtains in the former case, but not the latter (see Hanks, 2015, section 4.1). I’m inclined to reject this view, since it seems to me that I really can merely entertain a thought. This bit of (admittedly) haphazard introspection by no means provides me with a satisfactory refutation of Hanks’ proposal; but, of course, I wasn’t trying to present a refutation. A careful discussion about whether there is such a thing as mere entertainment of a proposition (i.e. of whether propositions have their force built into them) is beyond the scope of this chapter; so I propose to leave open (despite the misgivings above) whether predication can be (completely) analyzed in terms of modes of presentation ‘held together’ by *R**

constituents of propositions are held together by the relation I called “ R^* ”. Again, R^* is a relation I’ve left unanalyzed (without foreclosing the possibility that R^* could be analyzed), which unites a mode of presentation of (i.e. a way of thinking about) a subject with a mode of presentation of (i.e. a way of thinking about) a predicate.

R^* also contributes toward the answer to (U2), which asks how propositions get their truth-conditions. Again, let “ ϕ ” designate a way of thinking about a subject, x , and “ φ ” designate a way of thinking about a property, F . Then R^* unites ϕ and φ such that the complex, $R^*\phi, \varphi$ is true iff x is F . (Recall the predicative [English] sentential relation $__$ *is* $__$, and the truth-conditions for any sentence of this form.) Of course, what makes a proposition true iff *this* subject has *this* property is not explained by R^* alone; rather, it’s explained by those modes of presentation designated by “ ϕ ” and “ φ ”. The proposition expressed by (a use of) “Cicero was an orator” is about Cicero because it has as one of its constituents a mode of presentation of Cicero. Because this alternative picture does not identify as constituents of the proposition those entities (i.e. objects and properties) which feature in the proposition’s truth-conditions, it avoids the problem which befell the predicative act account (section 3.3).

Finally, consider (U3), in response to which a theory should explain why it’s impossible to entertain nonsense propositions. The predication theory had a nice answer to this question—it’s *impossible* to predicate a non-property; this rules out the possibility of “Love Desdemonas Cassio” (in English) expressing a proposition: there’s no such thing as the property of *Desdemonas-ing Cassio*. However, the view I defend does not say that predicates are features of propositions. So, the view I defend doesn’t admit of so easy an answer. Nevertheless, it seems easy to show that, on my view, “Love Desdemonas Cassio” doesn’t (in English) express a proposition. Recall (from section 3.4.1) that I’m leaving open whether *predicating F of x* is analyzed as *tokening $R^*\phi, \varphi$* . Suppose that we should analyze *predicating F of x* this way. Then, since it’s impossible to predicate *Desdemonas-ing Cassio* of *love*, then it’s impossible to token a mode of presentation of *love* and a mode of presentation of *Desdemonas-ing Cassio* united by R^* . More generally, if it’s impossible to predicate y of x , then it’s impossible to token $R^*\phi, \Delta$ (where Δ is a mode of presentation of y). I take it that it’s obvious that we can’t predicate *Desdemonas-ing Cassio* of *love*, nor (perhaps more obviously) can we predicate Cleopatra of Bertrand Russell. So, we can’t relate modes of presentation of *Desdemonas-ing Cassio* to *love*, nor Cleopatra to Bertrand Russell by way of R^* .

Now suppose we shouldn't analyze *predicating F of x as tokening $R^*\phi, \phi$* . Then, I suggest, we should analyze it as *tokening $R^*\phi, \phi$ while taking an appropriate propositional attitude (e.g. belief) toward that token* (see fn 144). Again, it's obvious that we can't predicate Cleopatra of Bertrand Russell. Then this is either because we can't token a way of thinking about Cleopatra related by R^* to a way of thinking about Russell, or because we can't hold an appropriate propositional attitude toward that token. Again, I say we can't token the right complex mental representation. Recall (from section 3.3.2) that tokening $R^*\phi, \phi$ constitutes *thinking about x as F* . Could someone (perhaps in a state of serious confusion) think of, say, Bertrand Russell as Cleopatra (such that his thinking this way would be accurately expressed by "Bertrand Russell is Cleopatra" (where the sentential relation *___ is ___* is a relation of predication)? I say no, for there is no such thought. To think of something *as* something else is to think of it as having a certain property. Cleopatra is not a property, so no one (not even in a state of severe confusion) could entertain a thought of Bertrand Russell as Cleopatra (whatever that would mean). Assume (for reductio) that someone, perhaps in a state of confusion, is thinking of Bertrand Russell as Cleopatra. Then his thought has the form *x is F* , with a mode of presentation occupying the " x " place, and a mode of presentation of Cleopatra occupying the " F " place. Only modes of presentations of properties can take the " F "-place (that's just what the place is, otherwise we are talking about a different logical form). So, the mode of presentation of Cleopatra is a mode of presentation of a property. Hence, Cleopatra is a property. But this is absurd: Cleopatra is not a property. So I reject the reductio assumption: even in a state of confusion one cannot entertain a thought of Bertrand Russell as Cleopatra. There's nothing special about the Russell/Cleopatra example, so I generalize: one cannot entertain a thought about some x as being F where " F " picks out a mode of presentation of a non-property.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶Michael Bergmann offered a skeptical argument for thinking that it's possible to think of some x as F , where " F " picks out a (mode of presentation of) a non-property. He writes, "philosophers often say things that seem obviously false and absurd—e.g., that sets can be exemplified or that they can be true or the contents of beliefs, that mere possibilities are concrete particulars, or that everything is a necessary being." Once we acknowledge this, so the objection goes, it's more plausible to at least to consider that one might be so confused as to entertain a thought of the form *x is F* , in which a mode of presentation of a non-property takes the place of " F ". As Bergmann acknowledges, each of the seemingly obviously false and absurd thoughts are of the form *x is F* . Hence, none demonstrate that we can (or at least seem to) sometimes entertain ill formed thoughts like *Bertrand Russell is (pred.) Cleopatra*. Do they at least give us reason to suspect that someone could (at least possibly) be sufficiently confused as to entertain such an ill-formed thought? I say "no", on the basis of the reductio argument above.

One may wish at this point to register the following complaint. True though it may be that I can't think of Russell as Cleopatra, that is not the issue; the issue, rather, is how this is explained in virtue of R^* and the ways of thinking about Russell and Cleopatra, respectively. But what independent reasons have we for thinking that I couldn't relate those ways of thinking about Russell and Cleopatra by R^* ? So far, we have only a *stipulation* that this can't be done; but a stipulation that R^* can't relate a way of thinking about Russell and Cleopatra doesn't help explain why we can't think of Russell as Cleopatra.

But this complaint is too quick, for it surely doesn't follow from the reasoning I offered above that my view doesn't explain the impossibility of nonsense propositions. I take the request for an explanation in (U3) to be a requirement that the account of propositional structure is explanatorily prior to the impossibility of nonsense propositions. The following, from Hasker (1997), looks to me like a fine definition of explanatory priority:

p is explanatorily prior to $q \leftrightarrow p$ must be included in a complete explanation of why q obtains. (Hasker, 1997, p. 390)

The complaint couldn't be that, given the (seemingly) stipulative reasoning above, we can't plug in my account for "p", when "q" is replaced by *there can be no nonsense propositions*. After all, nothing above stops me from doing this. Rather, the complaint must be that my account isn't a good candidate to plug in for "p". That worry is legitimate: if we can only stipulate that certain modes of presentation can't be related by R^* , then my account looks *ad hoc* (and is therefore a poor candidate to take the place of "p"). But we surely haven't seen (yet) that a stipulation is all that's available to me. Indeed, as I'll bring up again in section 3.4.3, the responsibility of giving an analysis of R^* (and the ways of thinking about objects and properties) belongs to cognitive scientists. Absent their verdict, or an independent argument, it's premature to dismiss my account as an explanation for the impossibility of nonsense propositions.

That is my conciliatory reply to the complainant. It turns out that I *do* have independent reasons for thinking that we can't unite modes of presentation by R^* to form nonsense propositions. Recall that I've compared R^* to the sentential relation represented (in English) by the predicative use of "is". Now it's clear that, if we populate the left node of that relation with "Russell" and the right node with "Cleopatra", then we get a piece of nonsense. The reason here isn't mystifying: that

relation takes a predicate expression for its right node, and (obviously) “Cleopatra” is not a predicate expression. Likewise, R^* shouldn’t be mystifying: that relation takes *ways of thinking about properties* for its right node, and (obviously) a way of thinking about Cleopatra is not a way of thinking about a property.

3.5.3 Objections and Responses

I’ll cover three objections here. The first (and most obvious) one has to do with the seemingly mysterious relation, R^* . That this relation doesn’t have a name strongly suggests (if it doesn’t *indicate*) that it’s a *primitive* one, tailor-made to do whatever unifying work needs to be done. Of course, we can solve most any philosophical problem by introducing a primitive object or property, but this (by itself) gives us no reason to think there really is such an object or property. What’s more, if this really is a tailor-made, magical property, then isn’t it an offense to naturalism (a position toward which I wanted to remain congenial)?

By now we’ve already seen that I *don’t* regard R^* as a primitive relation (though I’ve declined to analyze it). This is not a cop-out: it seems to me (as I mentioned above) that it’s for cognitive scientists to tell us more about this relation (including whether their best theories have a place for it). After all, the relation in question is one which unites mental representations (construed as modes of presentation of things), and surely a relation between those psychological entities would fall within the purview of the cognitive sciences. A priori philosophy of mind can only take us so far. The argument of section 3.3 brought us to the conclusion that there’s a relation like R^* which holds together psychological modes of presentation. A task for cognitive science is to tell us whether R^* features in (one of) the leading model(s) of thought. (Of course, philosophers can poke holes in the proposal, too, but my point here is only that cognitive science can provide some insight into R^* .)

Suppose it turns out that R^* doesn’t feature in any of the prominent models of thought; then that’s a good reason to reject the proposal I sketched in this section. But now suppose that on leading models there *is* a relation that ‘holds together’ psychological modes of presentation in such a way that constitutes *entertaining a thought*. Then it may be that, on those models, this relation is a primitive; or, on those models, that relation will submit to an analysis. If it’s a primitive, then the acceptability of this primitive rides on the reputation of the theories themselves. Since we’re assuming that the theories enjoy a strong reputation, it follows that, even if the unifying relation is

a mysterious primitive, it's a mystery that naturalists should be willing to accept (just as they're willing to accept mysterious forces in physical theories). On the other hand, if the relation admits of analysis, then it will be neither mysterious nor an affront to naturalism, since the analysis we expect from a model in cognitive science is a naturalist(-friendly) one.

Here's the second objection. I tried to elucidate R^* by comparing it to a sentential relation (viz. the one expressed by predicative uses of "is"). This makes R^* look like another linguistic relation. But, in that case, my picture of propositions looks like a non-starter, for the things I call propositions just look like more linguistic entities. If the representational properties of sentences are to be explained by appeal to further representations (viz. propositions), then the same should be expected of token mental representations constituted by modes of presentation related via R^* . Of course, we already saw in chapter 2 that the representational properties of propositions can't be explained by appeal to further representations (in particular, ones which represent things as being the same way). It follows that propositions can't be linguistic entities, and from this we can conclude either that the constituents of token mental representations aren't related by R^* , or that propositions aren't token mental representations (or both).

I deny that R^* is another linguistic relation. Though I tried to shed light on it by comparing it to a sentential relation, I also highlighted that the relata of R^* are modes of presentation, rather than linguistic expressions. This is enough, I take it, to demonstrate that R^* isn't a linguistic relation. One could try to modify the objection like this: propositions are supposed to help explain how sentences get their representational properties, but I'm using a sentential relation to try and clarify how a proposition gets its representational properties; this suggests (at best) that I'm merely kicking the same problem down the road, or (worse) that the order of explanation should run in the opposite direction (i.e. that mental representation should be explained in terms of linguistic representation).¹⁴⁷ Insofar as this modified objection is a challenge to the mentalist project (viz.

¹⁴⁷ This is supposed to be an upshot from Percy (1984). Howard Wettstein fondly shares the following excerpt from that work in his (2004): "[i]nstead of starting out with such large, vexing subjects as soul, mind, ideas, consciousness, why not set forth with language, which no one denies, and see how far it takes us toward the rest" (Percy, 1984, p. 17 quoted in Wettstein, 2004, p. 62). Wettstein adds: "The nature of thought ... is a difficult and elusive matter, one with respect to which it is relatively easy to lose one's bearings. Questions about the nature of thought are surely not the place to begin" (Ibid. p. 62).

By the way: when we understand explanatory priority in the way suggested in Hasker (1997), I'm inclined to think that this point is moot. Suppose it's true that mental representation is more difficult and elusive than linguistic representation. Even so, it doesn't follow that mentalism is false. For mentalism says that a full explanation of how linguistic representation obtains would need to make mention of mental

the one of analyzing linguistic representation in terms of mental representation) I've already provided a response in chapter 1 (section 1.4.1), and I'm not inclined to change the response. The response there addresses the concern that I'm merely kicking the problem of sentential representation further down the road. With respect to the worse alternative, it suffices to point out that I didn't provide an *explanation* of R* when I compared it to the sentential relation ____ is ____ (so the order of explanation *doesn't* run in the wrong, viz. anti-mentalist, direction).

Here's the final objection: I noted above that the (nowadays) orthodox theory of proper names and indexicals is that they're directly referring terms, contributing their referents as constituents toward the propositions expressed by the sentences in which they're embedded. It was a virtue of the predication theory that it preserved the direct reference theory; correspondingly, it's a vice of my theory that it entails the falsity of that view (on my view, proper names and indexicals do not have their referents as their semantic values).

I concede that this is a cost of my view; but, given the argument in section 3.3, this seems like a cost worth paying. We saw there that, if the semantic values of names are the referents of those names, then we must concede either that those constituents play a gratuitous role in the proposition or that we can't explain how an agent can (in some cases) rationally believe *and* fail to believe the same proposition at the same time. Often, the option of dismissing the direct reference theory is dismissed, on account of the fact that its predecessor (and most well-known alternative), descriptivism, looks untenable. But it's clear that we're not forced to choose between these two. When we discard direct reference, we aren't required to adopt a theory on which names and indexicals refer *satisfactorily*.¹⁴⁸ We might say (though I'll argue against this in the next chapter) that the contents of referring terms are mental files, viz. whose referents are secured by epistemically rewarding acquaintance relations.¹⁴⁹ (It doesn't matter too much for my purposes

representation, and this can be the case even if mental representation is more difficult and elusive than linguistic representation. Wettstein's remarks here likely weren't intended as a refutation of mentalism; that's fine—my only point is that these remarks don't indicate that linguistic representation is explanatorily prior to mental representation.

¹⁴⁸ Use of the term 'satisfactorial' to characterize how reference is secured on descriptivism is borrowed from Kent Bach (1994) and Tyler Burge (1977).

¹⁴⁹ See Recanati (2012), ch. 2, sections 2 and 3. Recanati alleges that reference through mental files is what's characteristic of *singular* thought (viz. thinking of an object, but not merely as a bearer of certain properties). Rachel Goodman criticizes this view, arguing that there can be *descriptive* as well as *singular* mental files. See Goodman (2016). It's beyond the scope of this paper to get into that debate, but I'm inclined to think Goodman is right; in that case, singular thought is characterized by featuring *singular* mental files.

whether the reference securing relations between modes of presentation and the things of which they're modes of presentation are *epistemically rewarding acquaintance relations*; rather, what matters is that there's some relation, distinct from the satisfaction relation, which links modes of presentation to their referents.)¹⁵⁰

3.6 Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to speak to a question avoided in the first two chapters of this dissertation, viz. the one which asks, *what are token mental representations like?* This is a daunting question, so I've approached it by criticizing and improving upon a picture of mental representation that appears in some of the current literature (viz. the predicative-act picture defended by Scott Soames and Peter Hanks). I spelled out what the predicative act picture of mental representations would be like (in section 3.2), and then showed that this picture is mistaken (section 3.3). What emerged from the latter discussion was the view I defend (section 3.4), viz. that token mental representations have *modes of presentation* (of objects and properties) as constituents, united by a relation (called here "R*") which is such that the complex is true iff the thing picked out by the one mode of presentation instantiates the property picked out by the other mode of presentation.

One may well wonder what to do with more complex propositions—viz. conjunctions, disjunctives, conditionals, and counterfactuals among others. What I've discussed here is intended as an analysis of atomic propositions; the hope is that more complex propositions (e.g. conditionals, disjunctions and conditionals) can be analyzed in terms of relations between these atomic propositions. It's appropriate to ask how the mental representations that are atomic propositions get related to each other in these complex propositions. The worry will be that we'd need to introduce a plethora of (seemingly) primitive relations, viz. the ones corresponding to *or*, *and*, and *if-then* in order to relate these atomic propositions to one another—and, of course, the more

¹⁵⁰ A discussion here of the seeming advantages of this non-descriptivist alternative to direct reference theory can't avoid bloating this chapter without being laughably cursory, so I won't say much about them here. What seems to me like a promising avenue is how this theory will treat declarative sentences featuring (what look like) names for non-existent things (e.g. fictional characters, or the deceased). The non-descriptivist view I favor says that those name-resembling terms alike have modes of presentation as their semantic values, and this gives us a way to provide consistent analyses of those sentences. The problems discussed at length in (among others) Kripke (2013), Soames (2007) and Salmon (1987) simply don't arise.

primitive (or seemingly primitive) relations we introduce, the less attractive the theory becomes. Since we've had plenty about atomic propositions to occupy us here, these questions about complex propositions will need to be addressed elsewhere.

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CHAPTER 4. DE RE THOUGHT

4.1 Introduction

This dissertation pursued the following train of thought: the representational properties of mental states are explanatorily prior to the meaningfulness of linguistic expressions (chapter 1); on the view I'm defending, this order of priority owes to the fact that the contents of particular linguistic expressions are token mental representations (chapter 2), and atomic mental representation tokens are psychological modes of presentation held together by an unanalyzed psychological relation (chapter 3). A natural question to ask next is *what is a mode of presentation?* I will have something to say about that in this chapter.

The notion of a 'mode of presentation' comes from Frege (1892) when he distinguishes between different ways of designating the point of intersection between three lines each connecting a point of a triangle to the midpoint of the opposite side (p. 153). If those lines are labeled "a", "b", and "c", respectively, then we can designate that point as the intersection of *a* and *b*, or the intersection of *a* and *c*, etc. The same point is designated in each case, but corresponding to each designation is a distinct mode of presentation of that point. The example suggests that we understand modes of presentation *descriptively*, i.e. as concepts represented by expressions of the form "the F" (e.g. *the intersection of a and b*). In the same work Frege states that a mode of presentation is 'contained in' the sense (i.e. cognitive significance) of an expression. Suppose we take this to mean that the sense of a referring expression *is* a mode of presentation of its referent.

¹⁵¹ If this is right, and we follow the suggestion above, then the cognitive significance of a name

¹⁵¹ Frege doesn't offer much in *On Sense and Reference* that helps us understand what it means for a sense to 'contain' a mode of presentation. Should we take this to imply that senses are distinct from modes of presentation? This seems to be a natural reading of the containment claim (see Zalta, 2001); but it's not clear what this distinction would accomplish in Frege's article. The notion of a sense is introduced to explain how some identity claims are non-trivial—viz. by distinguishing between the cognitive values of co-referring terms; but it's not clear why a mode of presentation alone couldn't do this. One might propose that modes of presentation are psychological entities, and so can't play the sense role in Frege's schema. But, when Frege distinguishes between senses and psychological entities, he calls the latter "ideas" rather than "modes of presentation", and prefers to say that ideas are *associated with* senses rather than *contained by* them (p. 154). One would expect that, if modes of presentation were just psychological entities, then Frege would've leveraged the terminology he'd already introduced, rather than coin new terms for the same entities (modes of presentation) and the same relation they bear to senses (viz. containment).

There's a better reason to think Frege didn't regard modes of presentation as psychological entities. Senses are supposed to be publicly accessible, such that the sense of a term in a language can be grasped

is a concept accurately represented by an expression of the form *the F*.¹⁵² Descriptivism is the view that the cognitive *and semantic* value of a ‘referring’ term is such a concept. So, if a view analyzes the semantic value of name in terms of a definite description, then the view is a version of Descriptivism (at least, about names).

Russell explicitly analyzed apparently-referring expressions in terms of definite descriptions, though he did this without appealing to modes of presentation. See Russell (1905) and (1911).¹⁵³ He says, for example, in the latter work:

I am admitting, and indeed contending, that in order to discover what is actually in my mind when I judge about Julius Caesar, we must substitute for the proper name a description made up of some of the things I know about him. (A description which will often serve to express my thought is “the man whose name was *Julius Caesar*”....). Suppose our description is “the man whose name was *Julius Caesar*.” Let our judgment be “Julius Caesar was assassinated.” Then it becomes “the man whose name was *Julius Caesar* was assassinated.” (Russell, 1911, pp. 119-120).

Russell’s contention is that the ‘constituent’ of my judgment corresponding to (my use of) “Julius Caesar” is a certain description which is (allegedly, uniquely) true of Julius Caesar.¹⁵⁴ The same

by any competent speaker of that language. But Frege does not think psychological entities are publicly accessible (this is one of the reasons why he thinks that the sense of a term must be distinguished from the associated idea). If we were to suppose that a sense contained a psychological mode of presentation, then it’s not clear how the sense could remain publicly accessible.

¹⁵² See Salmon (1986), pp. 47. A footnote in *On Sense and Reference* invites us to take this interpretation very seriously; consider how Frege depicts possible senses of the name “Aristotle”: “[the sense of ‘Aristotle’] might, for instance, be taken to be the following: the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great. Anybody who [takes this to be the sense of ‘Aristotle’] will attach another sense to the sentence ‘Aristotle was born in Stagira’ than will someone who takes as the sense of the name: the teacher of Alexander the Great who was born in Stagira” (p. 153).

¹⁵³ In fact, in his (1905) Russell prefers to *deny* that the things picked out by denoting phrases (including definite descriptions) are presented to us at all: “[t]he distinction between *acquaintance* and *knowledge about* is the distinction between the things we have presentations of, and the things we only reach by means of denoting phrases” (p. 873).

¹⁵⁴ The description in question is a denoting phrase, and Russell offers an analysis (/interpretation) of these in his 1905 piece. More accurately, Russell shows in that piece how we can analyze (/interpret) *sentences* which contain these denoting phrases. Following the directives there, we can interpret “Julius Caesar was assassinated” as follows: *there’s one and only one man named Julius Caesar, and that man was assassinated*. (This is not the most rigorous interpretation of the sentence that Russell offers in (1905); the most rigorous interpretation is one which takes “Julius Caesar was assassinated” to be about a propositional function; fortunately, we don’t need to worry about that here.)

goes for all ordinary proper names (which, strictly speaking, are not genuine proper names at all in Russell's view).¹⁵⁵ Hence, Russell defends a version of Descriptivism about ordinary names.

Russell's decision not to couch his descriptivism in terms of modes of presentation may not (at first) seem important here. In his view and Frege's, the contribution which an ordinary name makes as a constituent to the corresponding thought is something which denotes the referent of the name, and which can be represented by a definite description. But, despite how few details Frege shares about modes of presentation, he does tell us enough to discern an important distinction between his view and Russell's. For Frege, modes of presentation are among mankind's common property:

There result ... a variety of differences in the ideas associated with the same sense.... This constitutes an essential distinction between the idea and the sign's sense, which may be the common property of many people, and so is not a part or a mode of the individual mind. For one can hardly deny that mankind has a common store of thoughts which is transmitted from one generation to another. (Frege, 1892, p. 154)¹⁵⁶

For Russell, on the other hand, the cognitive value of an ordinary name is not common property. Russell held as 'fundamental' his principle that "every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted" (1911, p. 117). But, given his stance—at least in 1918, when he first published the *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*—on what can be the objects of acquaintance (viz. one's own sense perception and, perhaps, oneself) the

¹⁵⁵ A genuine proper name, in Russell's view, doesn't denote its referent; in his (1918), Russell says that "to know the meaning of a name is to know who it is applied to" (p. 112). Not so for a denoting phrase whose meaning we can grasp as competent users of the relevant language without knowing whom it denotes. It is well known that (at least at one point) Russell held only that sense-data and maybe oneself can be the objects of genuine (i.e. "logically") proper names. Though he countenances in 1911 that the self can be picked out by a genuine proper name (Bismarck might've been the constituents of his judgments about himself), and that universals and relations can be the objects of acquaintance (and, hence, might also be picked out by logically proper names), by the time he delivered the lectures that would comprise the *Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, Russell says, "The only words one does use as names in the logical sense are words like 'this' or 'that'.... It is only when you use 'this' quite strictly, to stand for an *actual object of sense*, that it is really a proper name" (Russell, 1985, p. 62, emphasis added).

¹⁵⁶ If we take "sense" and "mode of presentation" to co-refer, then it's clear from the excerpt why Frege thinks modes of presentation must be publicly accessible. But suppose (contra fn 151) modes of presentation are distinct from senses. Even so, senses are individuated by the modes of presentation which they contain; if the mode of presentation is not publicly accessible, then it's not clear how the corresponding sense can still be accessible by the public.

cognitive value of (my use of) a term *can't be* something accessible (even in principle) to another person.¹⁵⁷ This indicates that Frege and Russell are not talking about the same thing when they describe the constituents of thoughts and judgments, respectively.¹⁵⁸ Even so, both would say that the cognitive significance (whatever we take that to be) of an ordinary name is something that we can accurately represent by a definite description. I propose, then, to use the term 'mode of presentation' ('MOP') to pick out the cognitive significance of a(n apparently) referring term, and leave it an open question whether we should think of MOPs as publicly accessible or not.

According to Descriptivism about ordinary names, the thing picked out (i.e. denoted) by a name is whatever uniquely satisfies the corresponding concept. Suppose Descriptivism is true, and that someone is entertaining the thought corresponding to "Caesar was assassinated"—then that person entertains a thought which involves a concept accurately represented by an expression of

¹⁵⁷ Though (surprisingly) in that same work Russell does sometimes identify as possible objects of acquaintance things which can be accessed by more than one person. For example, he says: "If ... we say, 'the first Chancellor of the German Empire was an astute diplomatist,' we can only be assured of the truth of our judgment in virtue of something with which we are acquainted—usually a testimony heard or read" (1911, p. 115). As mentioned in fn 155, he also identifies universals and relations as possible objects of acquaintance (see p. 111-12), which are publicly accessible. However, it's not clear to me that Russell, even at this point in his career, believed that publicly accessible universals are constituents of thoughts. In 1911, he says that "[a]wareness of universals is called *conceiving*, and a universal of which we are aware is called a *concept*", after which he adds "this universal [yellow] is the subject in such judgments as 'yellow differs from blue' And the universal yellow is the predicate in such judgments as 'this is yellow', where 'this' is a particular sense-datum." (Ibid. p. 111) It may be that, for Russell, the constituents of thoughts expressed (in English) by "yellow differs from blue" or "this is yellow" are concepts, and that concepts are (contra Frege) mental things derived by abstracting from similar particulars. After all Russell does say in this work that "[n]ot only are we aware of particular yellows, but if we have seen a sufficient number of yellows and have sufficient intelligence, we are aware of the universal *yellow*" (p. 111). This, of course, doesn't entail that Russell thought of universals as mental concepts abstracted from awareness of particulars, but it does at least *suggest* a view like this.

¹⁵⁸ Even more convincing evidence of this comes from Russell's famous disagreement in their 1904 correspondence regarding whether Mont Blanc is a 'component part' of the thought expressed by "Mont Blanc is more than 4,000 meters high". Frege said "no", and Russell disagreed. Whereas Frege held that the *sense* of 'Mont Blanc' (which differs from its *reference*) is a constituent of the thought, Russell replied: "Concerning sense and [reference] I see nothing but difficulties which I cannot overcome...I believe that in spite of all its snowfields Mont Blanc itself is a component part of what is actually asserted in 'Mont Blanc is more than 4,000 metres high.' We do not assert the thought, for this is a private psychological matter: we assert the object of the thought, and this is, to my mind, a certain complex ... in which Mont Blanc is itself a component part" (Gabriel et. al, 1980, p. 169). It may seem at first that Russell and Frege are simply talking past each other—Frege is explicit that something called a "thought" is asserted, whereas Russell explicitly denies this. But Russell and Frege clearly do not mean the same thing by "thought": for Frege, thoughts are not psychological entities, whereas Russell is clear that it's a psychological entity that he picks out by the term. It's better to take it that both are talking about *the thing asserted*, and disagreeing about its constituents (viz. whether they are senses, or referents).

the form *the F* (say, *the Roman emperor named “Julius”*), and it’s about Caesar insofar as Caesar was the unique Roman emperor named “Julius”. Call thoughts like this one “*de dicto* thoughts”. Their distinctive characteristic is that their objects are determined *satisfactionally* (to use Bach’s term; see Bach, 1987, p. 12). A *de dicto* thought involves a concept represented by definite descriptions, and the object of that thought is just whichever entity uniquely satisfies the concept. The view that all thoughts corresponding to uses of ordinary names are *de dicto* faces well-known problems (see, e.g., Kripke, 1981, and Ludlow, 2018). For example, most philosophers will say (for reasons that I won’t discuss just yet) that at least some of my thoughts about my wife are not *de dicto*, even if they can be represented by a sentence containing the name “Rachel”. This tells against the view that the semantic values of ordinary names are MOPs, but *only if* we’re thinking of MOPs as they’ve been understood above, viz. as concepts represented by definite descriptions. Call those “descriptive MOPs”. Then the problems to which I alluded tell against descriptive MOPs.

One might be excused for thinking that all MOPs are descriptive—viz. that so long as a name has a sense in addition to a referent, then the referent of the name is whatever satisfies the sense. This thought is suggested (albeit not explicitly endorsed) in, e.g., Kripke (1981) and Salmon (1986). After criticizing the descriptivist theory of names (what he calls the “cluster concept theory”), Kripke offers in its place a sketch of a (broadly) Millian picture, according to which the referent of a name is secured by a causal relation between uses of the name, rather than satisfaction of the name’s sense (pp. 91-92).¹⁵⁹ Similarly, Salmon argues against Descriptivism in favor of (what he calls) the ‘naïve theory’ according to which “the information [i.e. semantic] value of a singular term, as used in a possible context, is simply its referent in that context” (p. 16). In each case, we are presented with two options—one according to which a name has a descriptive sense, and one according to which a name has no sense at all, and the temptation is to treat these options as exhaustive.¹⁶⁰ Giving in to that temptation would be a mistake (or so I’ll argue in this chapter).

¹⁵⁹ To be clear, the causal relation mentioned here is not what makes Kripke’s suggestion a (broadly) Millian one, since Mill did not argue that the referents of names are determined by certain causal relations. Instead, Kripke’s proposal owes its Millian flavor to its contention that names *denote* without *connoting*—viz. that the pick something out without attributing any properties to it. Mill says, “[p]roper names are not connotative; they denote the individuals who are called by them, but they do not indicate or imply any attributes as belonging to those individuals. When we name a child by the name ‘Paul’ or a dog by the name ‘Caesar’, those names are simply marks used to enable those individuals to be made subjects of discourse” (Mill, 1843/2013, p. 32).

¹⁶⁰ Again, whether others succumbed to this temptation, it strikes me as cavalier to say Kripke and Salmon

The sort of thoughts we want to explain are *de re* thoughts—ones whose objects are *not* determined satisfactionally, and so do not involve a descriptive MOPs which determines *via satisfaction* the thought's object. I'll describe *de re* thoughts as *directly* about their objects (as opposed to *de dicto* thoughts, which are only *indirectly* about their objects). It's reasonably clear that descriptive senses can't secure *de re* thought; so, we should either deny that names have senses full-stop, or deny that names have only *descriptive* senses. From the arguments in chapter 3, we saw that names *do* have senses (because their contents are MOPs), so they must have non-descriptive senses. I'll argue that, if we identify non-descriptive MOPs as the semantic values of names, and constituents of *de re* thoughts, we can deliver a treatment of names that addresses a major obstacle to the (by now orthodox) view that names don't have senses at all (which has to do with 'Millian' treatments of some empty names).¹⁶¹

Philosophers commonly treat “*de re* thought” and “singular thought” as synonymous, and say that the content of a *de re* thought is a singular proposition, i.e. a proposition which has the entity it's about as a constituent.¹⁶² A consequence of chapter 3 was that there are no singular propositions, but I'll have more to say in support of that consequence here (section 4.2). In the next section, I focus on distinguishing between *de dicto* and *de re* thoughts, and clarifying what I mean when I say the latter (but not the former) are *directly* about their respective objects. In Section 4.2, I focus on the problem of empty names, and argue that their can be *de re* thoughts about non-existent things. This does not bode well for singularists—those who say there are singular propositions (section 4.2.1). I also present a dilemma for standard singularist solutions to the problem of empty names (section 4.2.2). Finally, in section 4.3, I shift focus by considering one popular mental file conception of non-descriptive MOPs; I argue that this view is incorrect.

did so. Neither purports to defend his preferred view by a process of elimination, as if the failure of descriptivism entails that the other account must be correct. Each criticizes descriptivism because it was (at the time) the orthodox theory of (proper) names, and each defends his preferred account (at least in part) because (in his estimation) it fares better than Descriptivism. This sort of argument is consistent with there being some third option, according to which names have non-descriptive senses.

¹⁶¹ Usually those treatments are branded as “Russellian”, rather than Millian. While Mill did contend that names denote without connoting, he did not articulate a view according to which names have their referents as contents, or according to which a sentence containing a name expresses a proposition which has the referent of the name as a constituent. Russell, on the other hand, did defend a view like this (at least, when it came to logically proper names).

¹⁶² Tim Crane is an exception. See his (2011). On his view, singular thoughts are ones that “[aim] to refer...to just one object” (p. 31). A *de re* thought is just a singular thought whose referent exists. Hence, some of Le Verrier's thoughts about Vulcan were singular, but (alas) not *de re* (p. 39).

4.2 What is *de re* thought?

4.2.1 Stage Setting

One of the things I will do is propose a litmus test for discerning which thoughts are, and which are not *de re*. Toward this end, it would help to have a few examples of *de re* thoughts to work with—comparing them to discern those relevant features on account of which they’re categorized as *de re*. But a challenge already confronts me here, for it’s a matter of some controversy which thoughts are in the suite of *de re* thoughts, so I risk prejudicing the remaining discussion by building a list of ‘paradigm’ *de re* thoughts up front. Be that as it may, there must at least be *some* agreement about the paradigmatic examples of *de re* thoughts, lest philosophers debating this topic are hopelessly talking past each other. Below are a few paradigmatic sentences with *de re* contents:

- (1) Nixon won the 1968 election.
- (2) Feynman is a physicist.
- (3) Bessie [the cow you’re raising] is starving.
- (4) That tomato [the one I’m looking at right now] is red.¹⁶³

(1) and (2) are *de re* because the respective contents of “Nixon” and “Feynman” (i.e. what are contributed to the expressed propositions) are not individuating, descriptive concepts. Suppose that the content of “Nixon” was *the man who won the 1968 election*. Then (1) would express a necessary truth. But obviously (1) does not express a necessary truth. So, the content of Nixon is not *the man who won the 1968 election*. We can generalize to most any descriptive concept represented by an expression of the form *the F*. For if such a concept is the content of “Nixon”, then a sentence which says “Nixon was the F” (where “the F” is the concept which is the content of “Nixon”) is necessarily true. But it’s hard to find non-obscure, descriptive concepts to be the content of “Nixon” such that its predication of Nixon is necessary. So, the conclusion is that the content of “Nixon” is not a descriptive concept. Turning to (2), in his (1981) Kripke alleges that one can use the name “Feynman” to refer to Feynman even if she lacks any individuating, descriptive concept of Feynman—perhaps she knows only that Feynman is a physicist (Kripke,

¹⁶³ (1) and (2) are borrowed from Kripke (1981), pp. 40 and 81, respectively. (3) is taken from Jeshion (2002), p. 53. (4) is taken from Bach (1987), p. 16.

1981, p. 81). Presumably, if one can use the name “Feynman” to refer to, or say things about Feynman, then one can also entertain thoughts about Feynman; hence, one can think about Feynman without any individuating, descriptive concept of Feynman. Hence, (2) is also *de re*.¹⁶⁴

Sentences about people (or non-humans animals) that you’ve met (3), or things that you directly perceive (4) are also standardly regarded as *de re*. Possibly this is a testament to the popularity of Russell’s acquaintance criterion for *de re* thought (what he calls “knowledge by acquaintance”). Though Russell’s conditions for acquaintance are infamously restrictive, most philosophers who countenance a distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* thought agree that some (suitably generous) acquaintance condition is necessary. But we do not need to tie (3) and (4) to a particular view about the conditions for *de re* thought. We may simply point out that (3) and (4) yet again show that an individuating, *descriptive* concept is not necessary to entertain a *de re* thought about an object. Few would hold that perception provides us only with *indirect* access to an object, such that we can think of it merely as, e.g., *that which is the cause of these/those perceptions*.¹⁶⁵ Perception delivers us the thing itself, such that our thought is just about *this* (or *that*) thing. If one is a farmer, and Bessie is among his starving cattle, then if he should entertain the thought corresponding to (3), it seems there’s no definite description substitutable for “Bessie” such that the resultant sentence accurately represents his thought that Bessie is starving. The same goes for the tomato one is perceiving in (4).

Accordingly, I propose we understand “directly about” and “indirectly about”, when applied to thoughts in the remaining discussion as follows, where “T” picks out a thought about an object, x, and can be expressed by a sentence of the form *x is F*.

T is **directly** about x ↔ the content of “x” cannot be accurately represented by a definite description.

T is **indirectly** about x ↔ the content of “x” can be accurately represented by a definite description.

¹⁶⁴ I am skeptical about the claim that someone who uses the name “Feynman” lacks an individuating, descriptive concept of Feynman. Presumably, she would have the concept of *the famous physicist people refer to with the name “Feynman”*, which seems to be uniquely satisfied by Feynman. But, of course, even if she does have this individuating descriptive concept of Feynman, this does not suffice to make her thought *de re*, as we saw in our brief discussion of (1).

¹⁶⁵ An exception is Addis (1989). See pp. 107-109.

I'll argue in the following subsection that a thought is *de re* iff it is directly about an object. A thought that is indirectly about an object is *de dicto*.

4.2.2 *De Dicto* and *De Re* (Two Applications)

Because the mainstream view is that “*de re* thoughts” and “singular thoughts” pick out the same things, and “singular thought” is the fashionable term nowadays, my decision to use the (arguably) more archaic “*de re*” throughout this chapter requires some justification. There are two important reasons why I've declined to call the thoughts that interest us here “singular”. First, when most philosophers use the term “singular thought”, they're talking about a thought whose content is (as mentioned above) a proposition which counts among its constituents the entity it's about. I don't think there are such thoughts, so most philosophers would say that I don't think there are singular propositions. Nevertheless, I *do* think that we can entertain thoughts that are directly about their objects. To avoid confusion, I'm opting to call those thoughts “*de re*”—a term whose less frequent use frees it from the Russellian connotations I'd like to avoid.

Second, singular thoughts (*pace* Crane) are almost always taken to be object dependent—the overwhelming consensus is that singular thought about an object requires that the thinker be somehow acquainted with that object, and (as seems hard to deny) one can only be acquainted with something that exists.¹⁶⁶ It may turn out that this is true—that the kind of directness characteristic of *de re* thoughts is reserved only for thoughts about existent things (As we'll see later, I think this

¹⁶⁶ For a reference list highlighting the consensus around acquaintance and singular thought, see Jeshion (2002, pp. 54-55). One could contend that it *is* possible to be acquainted with something that doesn't exist, and that we need only reject Serious Actualism (according to which properties can only be instantiated by existing things) to make this intelligible. Salmon (1987) and Soames (2014) both contain defenses of the claim that non-existent things can be property bearers. This isn't limited to monadic properties—Salmon suggests (but doesn't explicitly affirm) that non-existent things can stand in relations to other things (including existent ones). Consider, for example, the relation between yourself and that of your merely possible sibling (p. 50). If this is intelligible, then perhaps the relata of acquaintance relations can include non-existent things, too. See also Haldane (1996).

But I confess that this doesn't strike me as intelligible. It doesn't seem to me that I stand in any relation to a merely possible sibling. Hence, I don't see the pull (if, indeed, any was intended) to think that a non-existent thing could stand in a relation to an existent one. But suppose I'm wrong about this, and there are some relations in which non-existent things *could* stand to existent ones. Nevertheless, it doesn't (straightforwardly) follow that we could be acquainted with such things. Acquaintance is (arguably) a causal relation of some kind (Bach, 1987), and it looks like causal relations can't count non-existent things among their relata (otherwise, it would be fair to say that *nothing* was the cause of something, but that something wasn't uncaused).

is false). However, it's not obvious that this is true; Robin Jeshion contends that the beliefs we have corresponding to, e.g., "Sherlock Holmes smokes a pipe" are more like our paradigmatic direct thoughts rather than indirect, descriptive ones (Jeshion, 2002, p. 57). Trenton Merricks illustrates that direct thoughts are not object dependent with the following thought experiment:

While Lincoln is alive—and so while Lincoln exists—[a journalist] says: 'Lincoln debated a senator'. That journalist thereby expresses a singular proposition about Lincoln. In other words, that journalist thereby expresses a proposition that is directly about Lincoln.... Our journalist keeps repeating, over and over, 'Lincoln debated a senator'.... As he repeats this, his intentions to assert that Lincoln debated a senator remain the same. And each repeated utterance of 'Lincoln debated a senator' is just what it appears to be: a repeated utterance of the same sentence. And whatever relevant causal-historical chains link the word 'Lincoln' to Lincoln are maintained from utterance to utterance.... But let us now add that after the journalist began repeating 'Lincoln debated a senator'—but before he stops—Lincoln is shot and dies. For the reasons noted above, the journalist is still—after Lincoln has died—expressing a singular proposition about Lincoln. And this is so even if a dead Lincoln no longer exists. (Merricks, 2015, pp. 171-172).¹⁶⁷

Again, I propose to identify the thoughts we're interested in as "*de re*" to avoid this connotation.

Unfortunately, the term "*de re*" comes with baggage of its own that I'd prefer to leave behind. The *de re/de dicto* distinction inherited from Quine (1956) does not map neatly onto the direct/indirect distinction which is important for our discussion. To demonstrate this point, let me start by giving a clear case of a direct and indirect thought, respectively:

(D) Rachel was born in the 20th century

(I) The oldest person in China was born in the 20th century

Grant that some individual really is the oldest person in China; then (I) is, in some sense, about him. (D) is a thought about my spouse. However, it should strike us as intuitive that there's

¹⁶⁷ Merricks is an exception to the rule with respect to the use of "singular propositions". Merricks denies that singular propositions have the entities they're about as constituents, because he rejects the view that what makes a proposition *about* something is its having that thing as a constituent. (see his 2015, pp. 188-190).

something different about the way (I) is about the oldest person in China, and the way (D) is about my spouse. That difference is the one captured by the direct/indirect distinction from section 4.1.1. Given that we're supposing there really is an oldest person in China, (I) is about that particular person only because s/he happens to be the oldest person in China. But there's some sense in which (D) isn't about Rachel simply because Rachel happens to be my spouse. To borrow a term from Bach (1987), (I)'s object, unlike the object of (D), is determined *satisfactionally*. The person whom (I) is about is the object of (I) because s/he satisfies the description, "the oldest person in China".¹⁶⁸

Now consider two applications in which the *de re/de dicto* distinction has been understood (I'm drawing this from Burge [1977] who is thinking of it as a grammatical distinction), neither of which is a totally satisfactory analysis of the direct/indirect distinction to which I've gestured above. The first is a *modal* distinction "between applying the predicate 'is necessary' to a proposition ... and applying a predicate modally ... to an entity" (p. 340). This is the application put to work in, e.g., Plantinga (1969) and (1974). A classic way of illustrating this distinction leverages the sentence, "necessarily, the number of planets in our solar system is greater than seven". The sense in which it expresses a truth (viz. the one according to which it 'applies a property modally' to the number which happens to be the number of planets in our solar system)

¹⁶⁸ As I'll point out shortly, Bach alleges that the objects of thoughts like (D) are determined *relationally* (Bach, 1987, p. 12). I hesitate to reach this conclusion at this point in the discussion, because it doesn't seem to (straightforwardly) follow from what we've seen so far. We may reasonably conclude from our brief reflection on (I) and its object that the objects of thoughts like this one are determined satisfactionally. However, from this, coupled with our short reflection on (D) and its object, we should only conclude that the object of a thought like (D) is *not* determined satisfactionally. I don't see why we should think (at least, not right off the bat) that all and only non-satisfactional thoughts are relational ones. When Bach contrasts satisfactional and relational object determination, and says the objects of *de re* thoughts are determined relationally, he notes that "[f]or something to be the object of a *de re* thought, it must stand in a certain kind of relation to that very thought" (Ibid.). But until we know what kind of relation he has in mind here, the satisfactional/relational distinction doesn't do us much good. After all, satisfaction is one kind of relation in which an object can stand to (part of) a thought. Of course, Bach is aware of this, and specifies that the kind of relation he has in mind for *de re* thoughts is a causal one. But my point still stands: that a causal relation (of a particular kind to boot) determines the object of a *de re* thought isn't something we glean from the observation that thoughts like (D) aren't satisfactional.

is the *de re* interpretation of the sentence. The sense in which it expresses a falsehood (viz. the one according to which it applies ‘is necessary’ to the proposition expressed by “the number of planets in our solar system is greater than seven”) is the *de dicto* interpretation.

Let’s say that a modal property is one picked out by an expression of the form *(not-)necessarily F*. Then to ‘apply a predicate modally’ is just to say that an entity instantiates a modal property. Truth and falsity seem like properties—they’re ones instantiated (only) by propositions. Hence, *(not) necessarily true*, and *(not) necessarily false* are a subset of the modal properties. A proposition is *de dicto* when it predicates one of these modal properties, and a proposition is *de re* when it predicates some other modal property. Now it’s clear (if it wasn’t already) that the modal application of the *de re/de dicto* distinction isn’t the one in which we’re interested. For one, neither (D) nor (I) look like predications of modal properties. Moreover, according to that application, for both (D) and (I), it’s not clear whether the thought is *de dicto* or *de re*. Indeed, both thoughts admit of a *de dicto* and *de re* interpretation, on the modal application. To illustrate my point, it will suffice just to look at (D):

(D-R) Rachel is not necessarily such that she was born in the 20th century.

(D-D) The proposition expressed by “Rachel was born in the 20th century” is not necessarily true.

(D-R) predicates a modal property to my spouse, and that modal property is neither *(not) necessarily true* nor *(not) necessarily false*. Hence, (D-R) is a *de re* thought. By contrast, (D-D) predicates of a proposition that it is not necessarily true; hence it’s a *de dicto* thought. The application of the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* which we’re looking for is one which clearly identifies (D) as *de re*, and (I) as *de dicto*. The modal application doesn’t do this.

The second application of the distinction is epistemic, where a *de re* belief is belief of something that it is F, and belief *de dicto* is belief in a proposition. (5) and (6) below are Burge’s

examples (adapted from the ones in Quine, 1956) of *de dicto* and *de re* belief, respectively:

(5) Orcutt believes the proposition that someone is a spy

(6) Someone in particular is believed by Orcutt to be a spy¹⁶⁹

Similarly, the epistemic application of this distinction is introduced in Sosa (1970) as the difference between “belief that a certain *dictum* (or proposition) is true” and “belief about a particular *res* (or thing) that it has a certain property” (p. 883). Presented this way, the distinction might strike us as puzzling. Suppose Ralph is the particular person that Orcutt believes to be a spy. Nowadays, we’re inclined to say that Orcutt believes the proposition expressed by “Ralph is a spy” (and singularists would say that this proposition is a *singular* one, which has Ralph as a constituent). In other words, we’re inclined to say that *for* Orcutt to believe of Ralph (in particular) that he is a spy, Orcutt must believe that proposition. But then it’s not clear how we can (consistently) categorize (6) as a *de re* belief.

Perhaps it would be better to present the epistemic application as a distinction between beliefs that are about *particular* things (*de re*), and beliefs that are not (*de dicto*). In that case, (5) is *de dicto* because there’s some sense in which it’s not about anyone in particular; but (6) *is* about someone in particular (Ralph, we’re supposing).¹⁷⁰ But this does not quite suit our purposes either. We’re looking for an application that helps us understand why (D) is *directly* about someone, but (I) is not. It’s clear that (D) is about a particular person, and so counts as *de re* on this understanding of the epistemic application of the *de dicto/de re* distinction. But one could make the case that (I) is about a particular person too—viz. whichever person happens to be the oldest person in China. To be sure, there is some clear sense in which (I) differs from (D) in how it’s about a particular person, but this is precisely the difference that we expect the *de re / de dicto* distinction to illuminate. The epistemic application (so far) doesn’t help with this.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Burge (1977). p. 340.

¹⁷⁰ This seems to be what Sosa is after in his (1970) when he argues that *de re* beliefs can be reduced to *de dicto* ones, such that the former are just *de dicto* beliefs with singular terms which denote their referents (p. 887).

¹⁷¹ Here is another way to try and motivate the thought that (I) doesn’t quite fit this *de dicto* mold. While it’s clear that (I) *isn’t* about a particular person in the way (D) is about a particular person, it’s also true that (I) *is* about a particular person in the way (5) is not. The belief in (5) doesn’t contain a definite description, so there’s no particular person such that we can say, whether he knows it or not, Orcutt’s belief is about

The upshot of this discussion is that, for a belief to be *de re*, it's not enough that it be about a particular thing; it must be added that the belief cannot be about the object in virtue of the object satisfying a definite description. We might opt to think of *de re* thought in line with the proposals in Sosa (1980) or Sellars (1969), according to which a *de re* thought involves a singular term, or an individual concept of the thing it's about. Though I suspect something along these lines is right, we're too early in the conversation for so specific an articulation; after all, one might countenance the difference between (D) and (I) without wanting to invoke singular terms or individual concepts, so she must have some notion of that distinction which doesn't require such things. For our purposes, and as I mentioned at the end of section 4.1.1, I propose that we understand *de re* thought negatively, as follows:

A thought, T, is *de re* \leftrightarrow (a) T is about a particular thing, x, and (b) T's being about x is not (even partly) analyzable in terms of x satisfying a definite description¹⁷²

The directness featured in (D) is captured by conditions (a) and (b) above. Though (I) is about a particular person, it's about that person on account of the fact that s/he satisfies a certain definite description—viz. *the oldest person in China*. So, though (I) satisfies (a), it does not satisfy (b). Hence, (I) is not *de re*.

4.2.3 A Test for *De Dicto* and *De Re* Thoughts

Having gone some way towards clarifying what it means for a thought to be *de dicto* or *de re*, we must now look for a way to discern whether any particular thought (or particular group of thoughts) is *de dicto* or *de re*. There's broad agreement with the distinction as it was presented at the end of section 4.1.1,¹⁷³ but (perhaps surprisingly) there's significant disagreement about whether

that person. But (I) *does* contain a definite description, and there *is* a particular person such that we can say my belief is about *that* person (regardless of whether or not I know it's about that person).

¹⁷² Here I'm following Rachel Goodman, who opts to understand singular thoughts as ones that "[involve] thinking about an object, but *not* merely as the possessor of properties *x*, *y*, *z* or *not* via it's properties, but in some *other* [non-satisfactional] way" (Goodman, 2016a, p. 440).

¹⁷³ See King (2015), p. 544; Goodman (2016a), p. 440; Sawyer (2012), p. 264; Bach (1987), p. 12; Recanati (2012), pp. 3-4. By contrast, Crane understands what I refer to as a "*de re*" thought as "one that purports to refer to just one object". See Crane (2011), p. 22.

particular (groups of) thoughts are *de dicto* or *de re*.¹⁷⁴ My argument later in this chapter will capitalize on problems surrounding *de re* thoughts which involve some empty names, so it will be important to substantiate my contention that those thoughts really are *de re*.

The goal of a test for *de dicto* and *de re* thought is to avoid construing too many thoughts (see Jeshion, 2002, 2009, 2010; Murez, Smortchkova, and Strickland, 2020) or too few (see Russell, 1910; Hodgson, 2018) as *de re*. Consider first the following excerpt from Jeshion (2009):

In addition to ‘Unabomber’, standard examples [of descriptive names featuring the direct intentionality of proper names] include ‘Jack-the-Ripper’, ‘Neptune’, ‘Vulcan’.... Acquaintance theorists typically deny the possibility of singular thought in these cases, but this seems intuitively incorrect. It seems that FBI investigators, and the rest of society, were thinking singularly about the Unabomber, and that Leverrier was thinking singularly about Neptune. (Ibid. p. 389).

What Jeshion extracts from these examples (and others which I haven’t recited) is that *de re* thought (contra Russell, and current orthodoxy) isn’t secured by some kind of acquaintance relation between a person and the object she’s thinking about. According to her view, a thought is *de re* when it involves a *mental file* on its object, and mental files are “initiated on an individual if and only if that individual is significant to the agent with respect to her plans, projects, affective states, and motivations” (p. 394). But, of course, the argument for her view hinges on the contention that thoughts involving “Unabomber”, “Jack-the-Ripper”, etc. are *de re*, and the justification given for this contention is appeal to an intuition.¹⁷⁵

Next consider Hodgson’s view, on which “Socrates is wise” expresses a proposition representing things as being such that there’s a referent of “Socrates” that’s wise (Hodgson, 2018, p. 7).¹⁷⁶ The proposal is also supposed to hold for propositions about the more recently deceased—

¹⁷⁴ For example, contrast Jeshion (2009) with Goodman (2016b) and Sawyer (2012).

¹⁷⁵ I only highlight this discussion as an illustration of the importance of correctly identifying *de re* and *de dicto* thoughts. I will not revisit at length the question of whether Jeshion’s view about the conditions for *de re* thought is correct (I think it isn’t), though I will have a brief criticism to offer of it (and the acquaintance-based view) in section 3.3 of this chapter.

¹⁷⁶ Hodgson represents the form of this proposition as follows: $\langle \text{exists}, \langle \lambda x \langle \mathbf{R}_N, x \rangle \ \& \ \langle \mathbf{F}, x \rangle \rangle \rangle$. Here ‘ $\lambda x \langle \dots x \dots \rangle$ ’ is a propositional function mapping objects onto singular propositions that have those objects as constituents. ‘ \mathbf{R}_N ’ picks out the property *being the referent of N*. ‘exists’ picks out a property of propositional functions (such as the one beginning with ‘ λx ’) which a function instantiates only if it maps something to a true proposition” (Ibid. p. 6-7). Hodgson is assuming that nothing instantiates the property *being the referent of Socrates*. Hence, there are no values of x that can be mapped onto true propositions

e.g. thoughts about George Bush Sr. (p. 3). A singularist is compelled to deny that the propositions expressed by “Socrates is wise” or “George Bush Sr. is wise” are *de re*. But there are (in my estimation) compelling reasons to think that some thoughts about the recently deceased (albeit perhaps not ones about Socrates) are *de re*. If that’s right, then we should not rely on a Russellian theory of content for discerning which thoughts are not *de re*.¹⁷⁷ What’s needed here is *not* a theoretical account of the conditions for *de re* thought, but a method for checking our intuitions about whether or not a particular thought (or thought-type) is *de re*. Such a method would guide us in checking whether the object of a particular thought (-type) is determined satisfactorily.¹⁷⁸

I’ll discuss three poor tests for *de re* (and *de dicto*) thought, before introducing my proposal. Consider (D) and (I) again. The first (poor) test capitalizes on the fact that (D) is *necessarily* about Rachel, whereas (I) is *not necessarily* about whomever it’s about. It’s absurd to suggest that the thought that *Rachel* was born in the 20th century could’ve been about someone else (e.g. Obama); the thought that Obama was born in the 20th century is distinct from the thought that Rachel was born in the 20th century. So, (D) can’t be about anyone else. By contrast, it’s safe to say that (I)’s object can change across contexts (e.g. points in time, or possible worlds). For example, if one entertains (I) in 2020, and again in 2050, it’s likely that (I) is about a different person in each case, without being a different thought.¹⁷⁹ The first test says that *de re* thoughts are necessarily about

containing the referent of “Socrates” as a constituent; furthermore, there are no true propositions containing the referent of “Socrates” as a constituent. Hence, **exists** does not ‘hold of’ that propositional function when “Socrates” is substituted for ‘N’. Thus, the proposition expressed by “Socrates is wise” is false.

¹⁷⁷ The Russellian view that *de re* thoughts have the entities they’re about as constituents does not by itself give us a test for identifying *de re* thoughts—that’s delivered (at least in part) by acquaintance-based accounts, cognitivism, or semantic instrumentalism (the latter of which says that introduction of a name is sufficient to secure *de re* thought). The most the Russellian view can offer (when combined with some plausible assumptions) is to rule out the contents of select thoughts (in particular, ones that are about things that don’t exist) as *de re*. Since not all thoughts about existing things are *de re*, and the Russellian theory of content isn’t beholden to one of the three accounts mentioned above, that theory does not (by itself) identify *de re* thoughts about existing things.

¹⁷⁸ If one thinks this is obvious enough on introspection such that we don’t need to spell out a method, I suggest s/he revisit the previous two paragraphs, and the papers cited in fn 174.

¹⁷⁹ Of course, I’ve committed myself in chapter 2 to the position that the thought/proposition (I) in 2020 isn’t really the same proposition as the one entertained in 2050, since these are numerically distinct mental representations. I’m setting that complication to the side in this chapter, but an illustration of my point that’s more consistent with my chapter 2 commitment would use possible worlds instead. If “T” picks out a token thought that the oldest person in China was born in the 20th century, w1 is a world in which M is the oldest person in China in 2020, and w2 is a world in which N is the oldest person in China in 2020, then T (which is entertained in 2020 in both worlds) would be about M in w1 and N in w2. Hence T is only contingently about its object.

their objects, whereas *de dicto* ones are about their objects only contingently. But the obvious problem with this test is that there are some *de dicto* thoughts which couldn't take another object, such as the thought that the square root of 49 is prime, or (if Kripke is right) that Saul Kripke's (biological) parents were born in the 20th century.¹⁸⁰

The second test capitalizes on the fact that I know whom (D) is about, but I don't know whom (I) is about. On this proposal, a thought is *de re* if the thinker knows whom/what she's thinking about, but it's *de dicto* if she doesn't know this. To be sure, there's some sense in which I *do* know whom (I) is about, since I know that it's about the oldest person in China; but I don't know which particular person (I) is about, whereas I do know that (D) is about *Rachel*, and not about anyone else. We may try to capture this extra knowledge by suggesting that, in *de dicto* thoughts, we can affix the parenthetical comment "whomever that may be" (or, for *de dicto* thoughts about non-persons, "whichever one that may be") to it without (intuitively) misrepresenting the thought. We may happily represent (I) like this: "the oldest person in China (whomever that may be) was born in the 20th century". This signals that (I) is *de dicto*. By contrast, the following representation of (D) is absurd: "Rachel (whomever that may be) was born in the 20th century". Hence, (D) is *de re*.

To see the problems with this proposal, consider a case where I tell you something about my wife, in response to which you say, "Rachel is very practical". Suppose that you are expressing a thought you had when you say this, and that you've never met, nor heard of my wife prior to this exchange (though you were made aware that I have a wife, that her name is "Rachel" and that she is the person I was talking about). It strikes me as odd to think that

(7) "Rachel (whoever she is) is very practical"

accurately represents the thought you entertained in this scenario. (This may be because there are only a few cases where affixing that parenthetical remark after a proper name sounds appropriate, and this is not one of those cases.) This signals, according to the second proposal, that your thought is *de re*. However, most (I take it) would deny that your thought is *de re*, either because you don't stand in a significant acquaintance relation to Rachel, or because (and we can stipulate this) Rachel

¹⁸⁰ In his (1972) Kripke endorses the view that one couldn't have different biological parents than one's actual biological parents. See pp. 110-115.

isn't significant to you with respect to your plans or motivations.¹⁸¹ Imagine now another scenario where someone you meet at a party is (for whatever reason) disguised. Without learning that person's identity, you might form the belief that he is a skilled surgeon. Suppose, in lieu of his real name, the disguised man offers you a pseudonym, "N.N.". It does not seem misleading to represent your belief that he's a surgeon like this:

(8) "N.N. (whoever he is) is a skilled surgeon"

and, according to the second proposal, this signals that your thought is *de dicto*. Nevertheless, the thought is about *this particular person* (disguised though he may be). So most (I take it) would deny that your thought is *de dicto*. The upshot of this paragraph is that the second proposal is simultaneously too broad and too narrow.

There is, of course, a sense in which (7) is an appropriate representation of your thought in the first case. Though you know "Rachel" picks out my spouse, you don't know which *particular person* is my spouse, and that ignorance is what the parenthetical note in (7) is intended to capture. Turning to the second case, there's a sense in which (8) is *not* an accurate representation of your thought. Though you're ignorant of N.N.'s 'true identity', you nevertheless know it's *this disguised person* that you're thinking about. If we take the parenthetical note to indicate ignorance of which particular person the thought is about, then (8) misrepresents your thought in the second case. Unfortunately, once we understand the parenthetical note this way, it's no longer an effective means of checking our intuitions about *de dicto* and *de re* thoughts. To see whether a thought is accurately represented by a sentence containing the parenthetical note "whomever s/he is", we must know first whether (given only the attribution of this thought to the thinker) the person knows the particular person that is the object of his thought. But by then we already know whether the thought is *de dicto* or *de re*.

¹⁸¹ As it turns out, I think (7) really is *de re*, since there's no definite description, *the F*, which Rachel satisfies, and which (1) we can reasonably expect most people, in the right circumstances, to believe Rachel satisfies, and (2) can be put in as the predicate expression in a sentence of the form "Rachel is the F" such that the sentence expresses a trivial, necessary truth. This tells against acquaintance and cognitivist accounts of *de re* thought, but not necessarily against semantic instrumentalist ones. Nevertheless, I take it that most should take (7) as a counterexample to the proposed test. If one doesn't, however, the following counterexample, leveraging (8) stands on its own.

We might just ask of any particular thought whether someone, given only that s/he enjoys this thought, knows which particular person is the object of that thought. If the answer is “yes”, then the thought is *de re*; it’s *de dicto* if the answer is “no”. But we are looking for a method of checking our intuitions about particular thoughts, and this procedure does not give us such a method. Instead, it’s a procedure for checking whether a proposed criterion for *de re* thought is met for a particular thought.¹⁸² But this procedure inspires a third proposal for checking our intuitions vis-à-vis *de re* and *de dicto* thought. By way of introduction, suppose someone is entertaining a thought, T, and T is about an object/person, x; if we ask the person to point out x, she may do one of the following (let’s grant, of course, that x is within view so that she can point to it, and that she does eventually point to x): *i*) survey the area and, spotting x, point x out to us; or, *ii*) call out, “which of you (or these) is ...”, and pointing out x after getting a reply. If I’m entertaining (D), and someone asks me to point out the person about whom I’m thinking, I’ll look around until I spot Rachel and (let’s grant that she’s there to be spotted), I’ll point her out. By contrast, if I’m entertaining (I), I cannot successfully point out the object of (I) without first asking and receiving an answer to the question, “who among you is the oldest in China?”.

Here is the suggestion:

A thought, T, is (intuitively) ***de re*** if someone entertaining T could (simply given that s/he entertains T) point out the object of T (as the object of T) without needing to ask which person/object is (the) F.

A thought, T, is (intuitively) ***de dicto*** if someone entertaining T could not (simply given that s/he entertains T) point out the object of T (as the object of T) without needing to ask which person/object is (the) F.

¹⁸² I’m inclined to say that *de re* and *de dicto* thoughts are *not* distinguished by whether or not the thinker knows which particular thing is the object of his thought. Smith might meet Jones, and remember the encounter, but later forget it was Jones that he’d met; later, when they’re reacquainted with each other, Smith might reasonably say “I remember that encounter, but I didn’t remember that it was *you* I’d met.” According to the acquaintance-based accounts of *de re* thought, Smith’s thoughts about Jones (prior to being told upon their reacquaintance that it was *Jones* he’d met) are *de re* thoughts. If he’d met Jones, then he satisfies most criteria for acquaintance, and most grant that *memory* serves as a means of acquaintance as well. Nevertheless, Smith doesn’t know (until being told so by Jones) that his thoughts about that person are thoughts about *this* particular person, Jones. More obviously, it seems I can entertain *de dicto* thoughts about my wife, even if I know those thoughts are about her.

This suggestion is a method for checking our intuitions about whether a particular thought is *de dicto* or *de re*, because it's intuitive to us for many thoughts (albeit not every thought) how someone would seek to point out the objects of those thoughts, and the steps she'd take (or wouldn't take) to point them out are supposed to indicate whether those thoughts are *de re* or *de dicto*.

Four notes here: first, the proposal is not an analysis of what it means for a thought to be *de re* or *de dicto* (hence the decision not to present these tests as biconditionals); second, the first parenthetical insertion in both tests is crucial. For if it only said that a thought is *de re* if someone entertaining T could point out the object of T (as the object of T) without needing to ask which person/object is (the) F, then it would be impossible for anyone to entertain a *de dicto* thought about an object once s/he's capable of entertaining a *de re* thought about that object, so long as they know which particular person/object satisfies the relevant definite description. Granting that, by all contemporary accounts, I satisfy the criteria for entertaining *de re* thoughts about my wife, if I know that she happens to be the youngest employee at Company X, it would follow from the above test (when stripped of its first parenthetical qualification) that my thought "the youngest employee in Company X lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan" would be *de re*. After all, were someone to ask me, whom that thought is about, I could point out Rachel without needing first to check whether she satisfies the definite description, "the youngest employee at Company X". My ability to do this, however, clearly requires that I have in my repertoire a *de re* thought to the effect of *Rachel is the youngest employee at Company X*. On the other hand, someone might tell me "your next thought is going to be about Rachel", and then prompt me to entertain the thought *the youngest employee at Company X lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan*. In that case, I could point out Rachel as the object of that thought without needing to check whether Rachel satisfies the description "the youngest employee at Company X". My ability to do this, however, clearly requires that I have in my repertoire a *de re* thought to the effect of *Rachel is the object of my thought that the youngest employee at Company X lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan*. The first parenthetical qualification rules out recourse to these other thoughts.

Third, the remaining parenthetical requirement that the thinker be able to point out the object of T *as the object of T* blocks contrivances like the following: suppose I'm entertaining the thought *the youngest employee at Company X lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan*, but I do not realize that Rachel is the youngest employee at Company X. Even so, if I were asked to point out Rachel, I

could do so without checking first to see whether she is the youngest employee at Company X. (Suppose I was simply asked to point her out.) If the test for *de re* thought did not specify that the thinker must be able to point out the object of T *as the object of T*, then my thought that the youngest employee...etc. would count as *de re* (this is because I could point her out if prompted in the right way, though I couldn't point her out as the object of the thought in question). Fourth, for each test, a *ceteris paribus* clause should be taken as implicit. If my wife undergoes extensive plastic surgery without my knowledge, such that I would no longer be able to recognize her, I wouldn't be able to point her out as the object of, say, (D). However, it's clear that (D) is nevertheless a *de re* thought. Extraneous factors that might prevent someone from pointing out the object of his/her *de re* thought (e.g. plastic surgery, a disguise, visual impairment, lack of hands, and so on) are ruled inadmissible by the implicit *ceteris paribus* clause.

By now it's clear why this proposal is a better test for *de re* and *de dicto* thought than the previous two we've considered. On this proposal (D) tests positive as a *de re* thought because it follows from my entertaining (D) that I am able to point Rachel out as the object of my thought. By contrast, (I) tests negative (i.e. is identified as *de dicto*) because I could entertain (I) without being able simply to point out any particular person as the object of (I)—I would need first to learn which particular person satisfies the description “the oldest person in China”. The proposal also makes sense of the two scenarios that confounded the second suggestion. If you've never met my wife, but (upon hearing a brief story about her) reported your belief with the sentence “Rachel is very practical”, you could not point out the object of your thought without first asking, e.g., “who among you is Rachel Jacobson?” (or, “who among you is Vince's spouse?”). Hence, the proposal (allegedly) rightly identifies your thought as *de dicto*. It also correctly labels as *de re* your thought that N.N. is a skilled surgeon. Were you asked to point out the object of that thought, you could point to N.N. without needing to check first which person satisfies a certain description. (To be sure, you couldn't pick N.N. out of a crowd if he shed his disguise, and in such a case you would need to ask something to the effect of “which of you is the man that I met at...?”. But quite clearly the fact that N.N. shed his disguise since you were asked to pick him out is one of those extraneous factors ruled out by the implicit *ceteris paribus* clause.)¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Laird Addis would disagree here. He says it's impossible to think of particulars directly, though it's not impossible to think of *properties* directly. (“A particular as such is not recognizable; it has no ... nature that makes it any but numerically distinct from at least some other particulars. A property as such is recognizable and hence recognizable as such.” Addis, 1989, p. 109.) Hence, it's not possible to have a direct thought

Unfortunately, despite the nuances added by these four remarks, this test also fails for a very obvious reason. Consider (2) again. Given my limited knowledge about Feynman, I could not pick him out without asking, “which of you is the famous physicist named ‘Feynman’”. But that would suggest that my thought corresponding to (2) is *de dicto*, and that the content of the thought is, say:

(2') The famous physicist named “Feynman” is a physicist.

But, (2') looks like a necessary truth, whereas (2) does not look remotely necessary. Given that, paradigmatically, the content of (2) is *de re*, and we haven't seen a good enough reason to reject the paradigm, we must reject this test as too narrow. The ability to recognize the object of one's thoughts is *not* a consistent feature of *de re* thoughts.

A more promising strategy is offered by Capraru in his (2013). He suggests that that we identify our *de re* and *de dicto* thoughts by examining which other thoughts we can coherently deny while affirming the thought in question: “a thought is singular [i.e. *de re*] iff we may agree with it, yet coherently deny about its subject *any* description (with a few exceptions)”, otherwise it's *de dicto* (Capraru, 2013, p. 1163). This is surely right: since any *de dicto* thought will involve attributing a property to an object, one who entertains such a thought could not at the same time coherently deny of the object that it has that very property. But Capraru's proposal will need some modification. It would be very time consuming for each sample thought (or even just one sample) to run the gamut of descriptions and see (a) whether there's a description such that I can't

about any person: “[w]henver we think of a particular person or thing, whether for the first time or any other, we think of it only as ‘the particular that...’”. (Ibid. 107). I suspect, then, that whereas I say that I can point out Rachel without looking to see who instantiates certain properties, Addis would charge that I'm mistaken. He'd point out that looking for her in the crowd involves recognizing ‘bundles of’ properties, rather than recognizing a *person*.

The charge that we're never acquainted with other persons is, in my estimation, as difficult to refute as it is to swallow. Fortunately, it doesn't matter for my purposes on which side someone falls. Suppose Addis is right. What would follow is that there are no *de re* thoughts about *persons* or *objects*, though there may be *de re* thoughts about *properties*. Then any thoughts about other persons are of the descriptivist kind, and we can then specify that the psychological modes of presentation that are constituents of those thoughts are the kind we'd represent by definite descriptions. What, then, could we say about the constituents of *de re* thoughts about properties? One point to make here is that this is just the same problem I'm working towards addressing in this chapter, save that the problem is applied to properties rather than persons. A second point to make is that, when applied to properties, there's the following tempting option: perhaps sense perceptions are the modes of presentation of properties, and (therefore) the constituents of thoughts about those properties.

coherently deny the object of the thought satisfies the description while also affirming the thought itself, and (b) in case there is such a description, whether the description is among the exceptional.

If there are *de dicto* thoughts, then presumably they are not exclusively enjoyed by philosophers (much less philosophers of language in particular). Hence, if the content of a name is a concept picked out by a description, the description should be one which we could plausibly expect most any person to (easily) be able to have in mind.¹⁸⁴ Now, with any name whose content is a descriptive concept, we can form a sentence whose proposition is trivially, and necessarily true. That sentence will have the form: *the F is the F*. Hence, I propose the following test, where “T” picks out a thought about an object, x:

T is *de re* if there’s no sentence formed by filling in the blank of “x is _____” with a definite description (believed by the thinker of T to be satisfied by x) such that the sentence (in English) is trivially and necessarily true.

T is *de dicto* if there’s a sentence formed by filling in the blank of “x is _____” with a definite description (believed by the thinker of T to be satisfied by x) such that the sentence (in English) is trivially and necessarily true.

Again, trying to check each possible definite description for each example (even restricting ourselves just to those descriptions accessible to most any person) is an exercise in futility, and I won’t take up space below making an inventory of each description I’ve checked, and why (if applicable) I’ve discarded it. The result is that, while this test may be able to discern whether a thought is *de dicto*, it can give only inconclusive (even if compelling) evidence for the conclusion that a thought is *de re* since it’s possible that I’ve overlooked some appropriate definite description.

¹⁸⁴ To my mind, this rules out the α -transform (i.e. world indexed) properties identified in Plantinga (1978) as essences of things (p. 133). For instance, because he is Plato’s greatest student in the actual world, Aristotle instantiates (Plato’s greatest student) α in every possible world in which he exists. As Plantinga uses the term “essence”, a property, P, is an essence of an object, x, iff (a) only x can instantiate P, and (b) x instantiates P in every possible world in which x exists (Ibid. p. 132). On the face of it, the suggestion that most anybody can entertain α -properties looks suspicious. But this is uncharitable, for another way of articulating, e.g., (Plato’s greatest student) α , is by saying “Plato’s *actual* greatest student”, and such a description doesn’t seem out of reach for most people. Nevertheless, in those cases where the content of (one’s use of) a name is accurately represented by a description (which I suspect are few) I doubt that most think of these α -properties; one’s more likely, I suspect, to think of Aristotle merely as Plato’s greatest student, rather than *Plato’s actual greatest student*. Moreover, this does not inhibit one’s ability to think of Aristotle. So, I don’t expect descriptions picking out α -properties to be ones that most any person will have in mind when s/he entertains a *de dicto* thought.

4.3 Empty Names and *De Re* Thoughts

4.3.1 Which thoughts involving empty names are *de re*?

It's a consequence of my arguments from the previous three chapters that the contents of *de re* thoughts don't have the entities they're about as constituents. But singularists contend that the kind of directness which is characteristic of *de re* thoughts can only be secured by including the objects of those thoughts as constituents of the thoughts' propositional contents. A singular proposition is one that has the entity its about as a constituent, and singularists must address how it can be that we seemingly entertain *de re* thoughts involving empty names. It's tempting here to present examples involving "Sherlock Holmes", "Vulcan", merely possible entities (like Salmon's "Noman"), or names for individuals that (arguably) no longer exist ("Lincoln", "Napoleon", etc.). Indeed, the final test proposed in the last section suggests that many of these examples really do pose problems for singularists.

Let's consider three types of empty names. The first type is comprised of the names of fictional entities, and includes (e.g.) "Sherlock Holmes", "Zeus", "Pegasus", etc. Kripke argues in his (2013) that fictional characters exist, and are abstract objects.¹⁸⁵ Suppose he's right; it would follow that, *if* we can be acquainted with abstract objects (see Davies, 2019), then those abstract objects might be the constituents of *de re* thoughts (i.e. singular propositions) about fictional entities. (One might imagine a *de re* thought expressed by "Sherlock Holmes is skilled reasoner" about the fictional detective, which succeeds in being about Sherlock because it has Sherlock, the abstract object, as a constituent.) I doubt that this would be a satisfactory account of *de re* thoughts about fictional entities.¹⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the test I proposed in the previous section does seem to identify at least some thoughts about fictional characters as *de re*:

¹⁸⁵ "It is a fact that certain fictional and mythological characters exist, just as it is a fact that certain people exist. No fictional characters would exist if people had never told fiction...: they exist in virtue of the concrete activities of people" (Kripke, 2013, p. 76). He is more explicit about what sorts of things fictional and mythological characters are a few pages later: "we say that ['Hamlet'] really does designate something, something that really exists in the real world, not in a Meinongian shadowy land. When we talk in this way, we use names such as 'Hamlet' to designate abstract but quite real entities" (p. 78).

¹⁸⁶ Suppose I'm entertaining the thought expressed by "Sherlock Holmes is human", and this thought is *de re*, with the abstract object *Sherlock Holmes* as a constituent. The thought seems to predicate *being human* of an abstract object, which is false. It seems, however, that this thought is *true*, since Sherlock (in the stories) is a human. What this suggests is that such a thought about Sherlock should be given a paraphrastic analysis (e.g. "in the stories, "Sherlock Holmes" names a person). See Bertolet (1984).

Let me start by discussing why someone would think otherwise. Take a thought about Sherlock Holmes. Arguably, (9) is a necessary truth:

(9) Sherlock Holmes is the detective invented by Arthur Conan Doyle

For if someone else wrote stories about a detective named “Sherlock Holmes”, but Doyle never did, then it’s hard to say whether *that* character is the very one invented by Doyle. Similarly, if Doyle decided to use the name for a character that’s *not* a detective (perhaps he’s a brilliant mechanic instead), it’s hard to say whether *that* character is the very one who, in the actual world, is portrayed as a detective. Could one allege on this basis that “Sherlock Holmes” is shorthand for the definite description in (9)? I say “no”. For one, even if we grant that (9) is necessarily true, it’s hard to believe that it expresses a *trivial* truth. Moreover, it’s not even clear to me that (9) is *necessarily* true. Imagine a possible world in which Doyle never wrote the Sherlock stories, but that someone else did, and that those stories are word-for-word identical to the stories written by Doyle in the actual world. Is the character called “Sherlock Holmes” in the stories from the imagined possible world distinct from the one called “Sherlock Holmes” from Doyle’s stories in the actual world? It seems to me that the answer is “yes”. However, this is an extremely contentious position, and the intuitions I have in support of it are not strong.

Let’s grant that (9) is a necessary truth. Even so, there are some thoughts about Sherlock Holmes which the test from section 4.1.3 identifies as *de re*. Suppose you don’t know that Sherlock is a creature of fiction, then you don’t believe that Sherlock satisfies the description “the detective invented by Arthur Conan Doyle”. You might think, “Sherlock Holmes is a great detective”, “Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street”, or “Sherlock Holmes wore a deerstalker cap”, but it’s not clear (to me at least) that there need be any description which you believe Sherlock to satisfy, and which can be used to create a sentence expressing a trivial, necessary truth about Sherlock. None of the examples just given contain definite descriptions that will do the job, since each of those sentences expresses a contingent truth. (Doyle might’ve decided to make Sherlock merely a detective, as opposed to a great one; he might’ve decided that Holmes lives on a different street; or, he might’ve written only that Holmes wore a top hat; to my mind, this does not entail that he’s writing about a different character than the one we call “Sherlock Holmes”.) Furthermore, it seems additional examples would simply look more like the three above. Hence, additional examples will

not delivery necessary truths either. Hence, I contend, it's possible to entertain *de re* thoughts about Sherlock.

The second type of empty name consists of names for merely possible objects. Here are a couple of examples from Salmon (1986) and Jeshion (2009), respectively:

“Noman”: “Let *S* be a particular male sperm cell of my father’s and let *E* be a particular ovum of my mother’s such that neither gamete ever united with any other to develop into a human zygote. Let us name the (possible) individual who would have developed from the union of *S* and *E*, if *S* had fertilized *E* in the normal manner, ‘Noman’. Noman does not exist in the actual world, but there are many possible worlds in which he (it?) does exist.... Noman is *merely possible*” (Salmon, 1986, pp. 49-50).

“Dessert Sensations”: “My father named his to-be-constructed cake-delivering business [‘Dessert Sensations’] many months prior to making his first investment, or securing any suppliers or restaurant customers” (Jeshion, 2009, p. 389).

The empty names under the first type (I allege) could not refer, because their purported referents (fictional entities) couldn’t exist (at least, not as concrete particulars). But “Noman” purports to refer to an object in another possible world, and “Dessert Sensations” purports to refer to an entity that *will* exist in the *actual* world. (This is what justifies putting “Noman” and “Dessert Sensations” into a second category of empty names.) Again, it seems to me that thoughts about Noman and Dessert Sensations can be either *de dicto* or *de re*. Let me explain:

For you and I, who know that “Noman” is stipulated to pick out the individual formed by the union of *S* and *E*, we will recognize the following as a trivial, necessary truth:

(10) Noman is the person who developed out of the union of *S* and *E*.

We recognize (10) as a necessary truth because we believe that “Noman” (as a matter of stipulation) picks out the individual who satisfies the definite description “the person who developed out of the union of *S* and *E*. Hence (10) reveals that our thoughts about Noman are *de dicto*. But thoughts about Noman need not be *de dicto*. Suppose you decide to tell your friend a great deal about Noman (most of which you fabricate), leaving out that he developed out of the union of *S* and *E*. Suppose further that your friend is not a philosopher, and so does not know that Noman doesn’t exist. This

person will not believe (10), since she has no reason to. Moreover, there's no definite description which she believes Noman to satisfy, and which can be used to create a sentence about Noman that expresses a trivial, necessary truth. Nevertheless, it should be obvious to us that she can think about Noman all the same. Hence, her thoughts about Noman would not be *de dicto*. It should be easy now to see that thoughts about Dessert Sensations can be likewise *de dicto* or *de re*, depending on whether one knows that "Dessert Sensations" is stipulated to pick out someone's to-be-constructed cake-delivering business.

Finally, consider the third type of empty name: viz. the type consisting of names for entities that no longer exist (e.g. "Napoleon", "Mary Magdalene", "Ronald Reagan", etc.).¹⁸⁷ It could be that *de dicto* thoughts about such entities are possible; but more importantly for our purposes is that one can entertain *de re* thoughts about them. Indeed, I'm not sure what definite description is such that we could use it in a sentence about, e.g. Napoleon, such that the sentence expresses a trivial, necessary truth. This should not be too controversial. Again, most proponents of *de re* thought contend that acquaintance is a necessary condition for *de re* thought; virtually all of those proponents say that memory is a kind of acquaintance. But one can remember something that no longer exists; so, most should admit that we can entertain *de re* thoughts about non-existent things.

Perhaps surprisingly, all three types of empty names furnish examples of *de re* thought. Hence, the directness characterizing *de re* thought is not object-dependent. I take it that this counts against the view on which entertaining a *de re* thought about an object requires entertaining a proposition which has that object as a constituent.

4.3.2 *De Re* Mental States and *De Re* Propositions

There's no shortage of proposed solutions in the literature to the problem of empty names, and I don't have the space to consider all of them here.¹⁸⁸ Instead, I'll focus on one of them (or one

¹⁸⁷ Why should we grant that these names are empty—viz. that the things they pick out no longer exist? There are several, compelling reasons (which I won't get into here) for thinking that Napoleon, Mary Magdalene, and Ronald Reagan *do* exist. The reason that we should grant that names like "Napoleon", "Mary Magdalene", and their ilk are empty is, perhaps, obvious: we should not be able to tell from the character of our thought that the object of that thought exists. One should feel free, if one likes, to deny that these names are empty; but, to avoid lapsing into the bad inference above, s/he should admit that the existence of Napoleon, Mary Magdalene, etc. has nothing to do with how thoughts involving their names can be *de re* even after the deaths of their objects.

¹⁸⁸ For a representative sample, see Braun (2005), Salmon (1987), Soames (2014), Sainsbury (2005), Hodgson (2018a, 2018b), and Reimer (2001).

family of them) which gets at the heart of my argument against object-dependence for *de re* thought. These responses address the problem by distinguishing between the contents of thoughts (or thought constituents) and the cognitive significance of those contents.¹⁸⁹ Thoughts (mental states) may express propositions, but we cannot infer from the character of our mental states the constituents of the propositions (if any) that are expressed. Whether or not I can recognize someone (or, how I would recognize someone) is a psychological matter, rather than a semantic one; so it doesn't follow from the fact that I can simply recognize and point out my great aunt in a photograph that the *propositional content* of my thoughts about her are *de re*—it simply indicates that my thoughts about her have a certain character.

Virtually every singularist holds that the full object of a propositional attitude includes more than just the propositional content of that attitude. It also includes a mode of presentation, either of the proposition itself (e.g. Salmon, 1986) or of constituents of that proposition (e.g. Recanati, 1990, 2012), which is identified with the 'cognitive significance' of the attitude. Some further identify this cognitive significance with linguistic meaning (Kaplan, 1989; Perry 1977), others with psychological entities (Recanati, 1990, and perhaps Wettstein, 1986). There's no need for us to adjudicate between the parties on this dispute.¹⁹⁰ In the rest of this section, I'll present a dilemma for this approach.

I will note first that the arguments from the previous chapter rule out this singularist approach. We've already seen that, given the assumption about the priority of mental representation (from chapters 1 and 2), and the roles propositions must play (chapter 2), it follows that propositions are (token) mental representations; moreover, mental representations cannot have the objects they're about as constituents (chapter 3). Furthermore, if a proposition is a mental representation, then we should not introduce a psychological mode of presentation of that mental representation, such that the latter counts as the cognitive significance of the proposition (chapter 3). In short, the arguments from the previous chapters permit me to draw inferences about propositional content from

¹⁸⁹ This distinction is normally introduced not so much to solve the problem of empty names as to solve (or dissolve) Frege's puzzle, which asks how some identity claims, like "Hesperus is Phosphorus" can be informative. Frege's constraint is that a theory of content must explain how this claim is informative, but "Hesperus is Hesperus" is not. Advocates of the view I'll consider here (see Wettstein, 1986) flaunt this constraint.

¹⁹⁰ Though the arguments found in the previously cited works by Wettstein and Recanati strike me as decisive refutations of Kaplan's and Perry's view that cognitive significance is identical with linguistic meaning.

(introspective) reflection on mental states. This reply, however, is dialectically uninteresting; for my opponent in this chapter is the singularist whose position was already ruled out by the end of chapter 3. A satisfactory reply to the singularist requires setting many of the arguments from those chapters aside.

The first horn of the dilemma starts with an insight from Wettstein:

[I]f [Perry and Kaplan] adopt [Frege's] vocabulary of "thoughts," then when he rightly admits that an utterance of, say, 'Vulcan is my favorite planet' fails to express such a thought, he might seem to be admitting that the utterance has no "thought content," i.e., that it is without cognitive significance. I suggest, then, that the Perry-Kaplan insight is better expressed if we drop all talk of thoughts. Talk of singular *propositions* is less misleading, but perhaps not entirely so. The Perry-Kaplan ... propositions are more like *states of affairs* than they are like anything we might reasonably call ... propositions, entities constituted by something like concepts. Talk of states of affairs is also pedagogically useful here, because it facilitates distinguishing what is going on on the side of the world from what is going on on the side of the mind" (Wettstein, 1986, pp. 197-198).

If Wettstein is right, then the singularist should identify the contents of propositional attitudes with states of affairs, rather than propositions (or, perhaps better: identify propositions with states of affairs). But states of affairs are not the bearers of truth-values. The state of affairs corresponding to Rachel having been born in the 20th century is not *true*, though it does *obtain*. Obtaining, or failing to obtain (which is proper to states of affairs) is distinct from truth and falsity (which is proper to propositions).¹⁹¹ Hence, propositions are not states of affairs. On the other hand, whatever is going on 'on the side of the mind' is something that involves concepts, and which bears representational properties. It's this psychological entity identified by Perry and Kaplan as the cognitive significance of the 'thought' that bears truth-values, and so seems better suited to be

¹⁹¹ I say this because something is true iff it represents things as being a certain way, and things are that way, and false iff it represents things as being a certain way, but things are not that way. I do not analyze *obtaining* this way. But one might prefer to do this, viz. to say that a state of affairs *obtains* iff it represents things as being a certain way, and things are that way (see Pruss, 2011, p. 4), and thus reduce *truth* and *falsity* to *obtaining* and *failing to obtain*. This view cannot be adequately addressed in a footnote, but I can raise a (serious) concern. Surely there are falsehoods, and falsehoods are (on this view) states of affairs which do not obtain. But if those states of affairs do not obtain, then they cannot contain entities like Cicero, or Rachel, even if they somehow 'involve' Cicero or Rachel. But if that's right, then these states of affairs begin to look more like 'pictures' of the actual world, which can either accurately or inaccurately represent the actual world. Hence, states of affairs begin to look more like propositions, and the reduction of *truth* to *obtaining* begins to look less tenable.

identified as the propositional content of the thought (the state of affairs serving instead as the truth-maker for the proposition).

But now suppose that Wettstein is mistaken, and that the singularist need not identify propositions with states of affairs. As we've seen, this task is difficult, since it's hard to discern what relation could hold together the constituents of a singular proposition such that the proposition has truth conditions (see chapter 3).¹⁹² Jeffrey King presents the most sophisticated attempt at solving this problem: on his view, propositions are facts about language. The proposition, for example, expressed by the English sentence "Michael Swims" is the following fact:

There is a context, c , assignment g and language L such that for some lexical items a and b of L , Michael is the semantic value of a relative to g and c and the property of swimming is the semantic value of b relative to g and c and a occurs at the left terminal node of a syntactic relation R that in L encodes ascription and b occurs at R 's right terminal node (King, 2014, p. 56).

More generally, for propositions expressed by sentences of the form "x is G", there's a propositional relation we can represent by swapping out "x" for "Michael", and "G" for "the property of swimming" in the above fact. Call this relation "P". Because P holds together an object, and the property attributed to that object, the proposition expressed by a sentence of the form "x is G" is a singular proposition—one that has the entity it's about as a constituent.

We do not need to dwell for too long on King's picture to see a problem: suppose Michael does stand in the relation P to the property of swimming. Why should this fact have a truth-value (much less its actual truth conditions)? King's answer is that we *interpret* P such that P(Michael, the property of swimming) is true iff Michael swims, and we do this because the syntactic relation between "Michael" and "swims" encodes ascription in English:

[W]hat is it we do that amounts to our so interpreting [the propositional fact that Michael swims]? It is simply that we compose the semantic values at the terminal nodes of the propositional relation in the way we do. In the end, this is just a reflex of the sentential relation R having the semantic significance it does.... It just isn't coherent to interpret the sentential relation R as ascribing the semantic value of "swimming" to the semantic value of "Michael" while composing the semantic

¹⁹² Merricks thinks there is no such relation; see his (2015), chapters 4 and 5.

values of Michael and the property of swimming in some other way as one moves up the propositional relation (Ibid. p. 55).

This is a difficult passage, but King's allegation is that our interpretation of a propositional fact is automatic, and consistent with our interpretation of syntactic relations. However, it's not obvious that we interpret propositional facts automatically; notice it takes some time to grasp P—how, then, could we automatically interpret P (or facts involving P) without grasping P? Indeed, once we do grasp P, it's not clear that we automatically (or are tempted to) interpret propositional facts as having truth-conditions at all. One feels (I hope) no temptation upon reading the sample fact above to say *it is true iff Michael swims*. This is because (at least intuitively) facts, like states of affairs, are not the sorts of things that have truth-conditions. The claim that we interpret P at all (moreover, that we interpret P 'in the way dictated by our interpretation of' R) is *ad hoc*.

Moreover, the requirement that these propositional facts be interpreted in order to have their truth-conditions constitutes another, more severe problem with King's view. In chapter 2, I argued that the content of a belief, thought, or utterance must be *primary* truth-bearers, and this entails that propositions don't 'inherit' their alethic properties from something else. By admitting that propositional facts must be interpreted in order to have truth-conditions, King concedes that those facts aren't primary truth-bearers; hence, those facts can't be the contents of thoughts. To be sure, one could deny that contents must be primary truth-bearers. But this approach faces at least two problems. First, it's not clear that it circumvents my objection; instead, by loosening the criteria on what can count as a proposition, the approach simply changes the topic. Second, by denying that propositions are primary truth-bearers, one is forced to admit that what a thought is *about* is not ultimately explained in terms of its content. (This is because propositions are alleged to inherit their representational properties from something else.) This looks incoherent.

Let's quickly take stock. The objection which occupied us for the past couple of pages said, first, that there's a difference between the cognitive significance of a thought, and, second, that my argument from section 4.2.1 glosses over that distinction. My response is in the form of a dilemma: suppose the objector is right; then singular propositions are either states of affairs, or they are not. But if they are states of affairs, then they don't have truth-values—this result is absurd, because it would follow from this that propositions don't have truth-values. But if propositions are singular without being states of affairs, then, on the best view available, they're secondary representations.

This, I allege, is a falsehood. I therefore reject (for reasons independent of the ones in chapters 1 and 3) the singularist's distinction between the content and cognitive significance of a thought, and uphold the inference in the argument from section 4.2.1: some thoughts about people/objects that no longer exist are classified as *de re*, according to my test; so, what such a thought is about does not depend on the existence of the object; hence, it's content is not a singular proposition.

4.4 *De Re Thought and Mental Files*

A popular strategy among singularists is to identify *mental files* as the vehicles of singular thought.¹⁹³ Murez and Recanati, for example, introduce mental files as “devices of direct reference whose deployment makes it possible to entertain *singular thoughts*, i.e. thoughts that are about particular objects” (Murez & Recanati, 2016, p. 267). On this approach, a subject ‘opens’ a mental file on an object once she meets the right conditions (e.g. acquaintance or significance conditions) for *de re* thought. These files have two functions; the first was already mentioned, viz. the securing of *de re* thoughts about the referent of the file: if I’ve opened a file on Rachel, then I entertain *de re* thoughts about her by leveraging that file (Recanati likens mental files to “singular terms in the language of thought”).¹⁹⁴ The second function is to store information about the object of the file. My mental file on Rachel may contain concepts of properties I believe (correctly or not) her to have, e.g. *being employed*, *being married to Vince*, etc. Whatever the contents of my Rachel file, they play no part in determining the object of my thoughts involving that file. Suppose that, for some reason, I believe Rachel to be an heir to the British throne. Then my file on her would contain a concept of the property *being an heir to the British throne*. I’ll call up this file when I think about Rachel, but I thereby successfully think about *her* regardless of the fact that she doesn’t satisfy that property recorded in the file. What secures the referent of a mental file is not the unique satisfaction of its contents, but that relation holding between the file and its actual referent, in virtue of which the file came into existence (viz. whichever relations are required by one’s preferred theory about the criteria for *de re* thought).¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ See, for example, Perry (1980, 2001), Bach (1987), Fodor (2008), Jeshion (2010), Recanati (1993, 2012), Sainsbury (2005) and maybe Grice (1969). In the preface to his (2012), Recanati cites still others (see p. vii).

¹⁹⁴ Recanati (2012), p. viii.

¹⁹⁵ Some highlight an analogy between the *mental files* of philosophers and the *object files* of psychologists (Murez & Recanati, 2016; Murez, Smortchkova & Strickland, 2020). Object files are of particular interest

It's possible to possess multiple mental files on the same object—I may see a stray cat running across my backyard and open a file on it; later (at night, let's say) I may see a small, dark figure sneaking across the yard and open a file on *it* while failing to realize that (as it turns out) the dark figure is the stray cat from earlier. I may then enjoy *de re* thoughts about that cat by pulling up either file. In this way, files act like modes of presentation: the same object can be presented to us through different files, and we may not realize that those files 'co-refer'.¹⁹⁶ Indeed, advocates for mental files identify these as psychological modes of presentation which, alongside singular propositions, comprise the full objects of propositional attitudes. Again, because the objects of mental files are not determined via satisfaction, these files are branded as *non-descriptive* modes of presentation.

Now let's briefly return to one of the questions with which I began this chapter: *what are modes of presentation?* (Recall, this question is asked in the context of the theory of propositions I've been defending in this dissertation, according to which propositions are token mental representations composed of modes of presentation 'held together' by an unanalyzed relation.) It seems natural and appropriate for someone sympathetic to this view of propositions to offer mental files (or tokenings of mental files) as the modes of presentation which, on my view, are among the constituents of propositions. To be sure, as I mentioned above, no singularist would suggest such a thing; but we are no longer considering singularism. Instead, we are wondering whether these non-descriptive modes of presentation to which the singularist appeals could be co-opted as the semantic content of a name, which appears in a sentence expressing a *de re* thought. If mental files can be co-opted for this purpose leveraged for this purpose, then, if I entertain a thought about Rachel, the proposition which is the content of that thought has (one of) my mental file(s) on Rachel as a constituent. Attractive though this solution may be, I think we should reject it. *De re* thoughts are not secured by mental files (not even mental files of a certain type, as I'll argue

to psychologists studying vision, and are 'opened' when a certain entity in one's visual field is individuated. These files are used to track individuated objects, and (like mental files) can store information about their objects. Object files are not mental files; the former are opened on the basis of spatiotemporal features, whereas the latter are opened on the basis of (maybe) acquaintance or significance relations. Murez and Recanati suggest that object files are 'precursors' of mental files (p. 268), but do not elaborate on what this means.

¹⁹⁶ I say "may not", because it is (obviously) possible that one will come to realize that files co-refer. Suppose the dark figure walks under a light, and I recognize it as the stray I'd already seen. In these cases, Recanati says that the co-referring files are linked to each other, such that their contents are freely shared between them—the multiple files do not 'merge' into one. See Recanati (2012), ch. 9.

shortly), so the mental representations which I identify as *de re* propositions don't have mental files as constituents.¹⁹⁷

If mental files were the constituents of *de re* propositions, then the content of my use of "Rachel" in (a use of) the English sentence, "Rachel was born in the twentieth century" is a mental file on Rachel. More generally, those linguistic expressions which singularists identify as *directly referring* (e.g. proper names) would have mental files as their contents. It may come as no surprise that no one has proposed the view that the content of a directly referring term enjoys the function of storing information about the referent of the term. Searle comes close in *Proper Names* when he says that proper names "function not as descriptions, but as pegs on which to hang descriptions" (Searle, 1958, p. 172). But even here the similarity is superficial, since Searle does not deny that proper names have descriptive content. His claim is just that "[t]o use a proper name referringly is to presuppose the truth of certain uniquely referring descriptive statements, but ... is not ordinarily to assert these statements or even to indicate which exactly are presupposed" (p. 171). The mental file proposal should strike us (at least initially) as puzzling: the content of a name functions as the contribution which that name makes toward the truth-conditions of the utterance in which the name is embedded. We should be surprised to hear that the content of a name *also* functions to store information which makes *no* contribution toward those truth-conditions.

But, alas, the proposal is not incoherent. There's no logical problem with designating mental files both as the contents of (purportedly) directly referring terms, and as devices for storing information about the referents of those terms. The more serious problem with the proposal is that it seems like mental files can feature in *de dicto* thoughts as well, e.g. *de dicto* thoughts about the Unabomber, or Jack the Ripper. In that case, even if mental files were also to feature in *de re* thoughts, they would play no explanatory role in what makes the thought *de re*.

There's a convincing case in Goodman (2016) for the possibility of *descriptive* mental files—viz. files which are 'governed by' a description (p. 444).¹⁹⁸ If mental files are introduced to store

¹⁹⁷ I'm attracted to (but do not endorse) the 'austere picture of singular concepts' defended by Alfonso Losada in his (2016), which is (as the name suggests) a more modest view about the constituents of *de re* thought than the mental files picture. The austere picture only says that "singular concepts are mental particulars with linguistic-psychological traits, which...refer relationally—if they refer at all" (pp. 407-408). I do not endorse this view because I do not believe that singular concepts have linguistic traits (e.g. contents), since they are constituents of contents.

¹⁹⁸ For a file to be governed by a description, that description must, according to Goodman, play certain roles with respect to that file, viz. determine (a) the object of the file, (b) limits on admissible 'mistakes' in the file, (c) which information can be stored in the file, and (d) the file's persistence conditions. (p. 445).

information about and keep track of objects, then one could conceivably store information and keep track of an object picked out by a definite description. In her example, George de Mestral (the inventor of Velcro) opens a file on the inventor of the zipper without having been acquainted with, or knowing who (in fact) invented the zipper (p. 449). Goodman's conception of a mental file is heavily influenced by Jeshion, and both contend that files are opened when an object satisfies a significance condition (see section 4.1.3). Because, in Goodman's example, de Mestral suffers many paranoid thoughts about the inventor of the zipper (and, hence, that person, whomever that is, is significant to de Mestral), "[i]t is psychologically plausible that, in the case described, de Mestral opens and maintains a mental file, using the description 'the inventor of the zipper'" (p. 449). In summary, Goodman's proposal is that, if the object of a *de dicto* thought is significant to us, then we may open a mental file on *it*, fixing the referent of that file by a definite description (e.g. 'the inventor of the zipper'); because the object of this file is fixed by a definite description, the file is a *descriptive* mode of presentation of that object.

There are (at least) three ways to reply to Goodman's argument. Because Jeshion thinks the significance condition secures *de re* thought, she would deny that de Mestral's thoughts about the inventor of the zipper are *de dicto*, even if the file's object is fixed by a definite description. But, according to the test I presented in section 4.1.2, de Mestral's thoughts about the inventor of the zipper are clearly *de dicto* (you can see this for yourself by putting yourself in de Mestral's position and imagining having to point out the inventor of the zipper); moreover, this response simply shrugs off the serious problem that the file's object is determined satisfactorily. The response suggests that we can have *de re* thoughts about objects, where the object of those thoughts are determined satisfactorily. This, of course, is impossible.

The second way to reply to Goodman's argument is to deny that a mental file can be opened in the way she describes. Proponents of acquaintance conditions for singular thought will contend that a mental file can only be opened when the right acquaintance conditions are satisfied, and no such conditions are satisfied in Goodman's example.¹⁹⁹ But this response (at best) simply begs the question, since Goodman provides reasons for thinking that de Mestral *does* open a mental file on the inventor of the zipper without being acquainted with him. Moreover, the response misses its

¹⁹⁹ See, e.g., Recanati (2012). Recanati says that mental files function as 'information channels', and the information stored in these channels is secured through 'epistemically rewarding' acquaintance relations (pp. 37-38).

target. Philosophers like Recanati who pair acquaintance theories of *de re* thought with mental files usually defend the following argument:

- (11) One can entertain a *de re* thought about an object \leftrightarrow she has a mental file on that object
- (12) One can entertain a *de re* thought about an object \leftrightarrow she is acquainted with that object
- \therefore (13) One has a mental file on an object \leftrightarrow she is acquainted with that object

The imagined response reiterates premise (12) of this argument; but Goodman's objection clearly targets premise (11). Note that (11) can be false even if (12) is true. It may be that acquaintance is required for *de re* thought, even if *de re* thought about an object doesn't require a *mental file* on that object. In other words, the lesson we're permitted to draw from Goodman and Jeshion is that a significance condition is required to open a mental file, but *not* to secure *de re* thought. The acquaintance theorist owes Goodman a response to her criticism of (11), and that is (as yet) forthcoming.²⁰⁰ But if we think of mental files merely as devices for storing information, and tracking objects, it seems more than plausible that Jeshion and Goodman are correct: we open a file not through acquaintance, but through significance. Holding a significance criterion for mental files and an acquaintance criterion for *de re* thought allows us to reconcile many of the intuitions advanced in Jeshion (2002, 2009), Goodman (2016a, 2016a, 2016b) and Orlando (2016) with the highly selective results from applying the test for singular and *de re* thought from section 4.1.2.

The third way to reply to Goodman's argument is to make a couple of concessions. One could adopt a pluralist account on which mental files can either be opened via satisfaction of acquaintance *or* significance conditions. She may then retain her view that acquaintance is required for *de re* thought, and say that *de re* thought involves thinking specifically with mental files that are opened through *acquaintance*. After all, it's these files, and not the ones that are opened merely via satisfaction of a significance condition, whose referents are determined *relationally*. According to this response, all *de re* thoughts have mental files as constituents, but not all thoughts with

²⁰⁰ Goodman's argument starts with a list of central features of mental files (p. 444), and then proceeds to indicate how those features are consistent with descriptive mental files. A satisfactory response to this argument must show that those features are not consistent with descriptive mental files, or show that there's some other central feature(s) of mental files, which, when combined with the others, is(are) inconsistent with descriptive mental files.

mental files as constituents are *de re* thoughts. But this proposal raises a serious puzzle. Suppose I have a descriptive mental file on the Unabomber; then one of my thoughts about the Unabomber which features that mental file as a constituent would be *de dicto*. Since that thought is *de dicto*, we could accurately represent the thought (i.e. the proposition entertained) with a sentence of the following form: “the F is G”. The description substituted for “the F” would be the governing description of my Unabomber mental file. But that description (or, the concept corresponding to that description) would be part of the content of that file. However, mental file theorists deny that the contents of files feature in the corresponding proposition.²⁰¹

A tempting solution is to insist that descriptive and non-descriptive mental files make different contributions to the expressed proposition: descriptive mental files contribute their governing concepts, and non-descriptive files contribute themselves. But this is perplexing; why should the presence (or absence) of a governing concept determine whether a file can be a constituent of a thought? Moreover, if files are supposed to be the tools by which we think about their objects, then it’s the descriptive file itself, rather than its governing concept, that should feature in the *de dicto* thought about its object.

Another solution is to say that *mental files* are not (strictly speaking) the constituents of thoughts/propositions, but their *names* (or *labels*) are those constituents. Recanati countenances this suggestion (“By deploying the file (or its ‘address’ or ‘label’) in thought, the subject can think about the object in virtue of standing in the relevant relation to it.” (2012, p. 37)), as does Fodor in his (2008):

When you are introduced to John (or otherwise become apprised of him), you assign him a Mentalese name and you open a mental file, and the same Mentalese expression (M(John), *serves both as John’s mental name and as the name of the file that contains your information about John....* Tokens of M(John) are what you use to represent John in your thoughts; Names in thought (in contrast to, say, descriptions in thought) afford a *primitive* way of bringing John before the mind. (Fodor, 2008, pp. 94-95).

²⁰¹ For example: “The role of a mental file based on a certain acquaintance relation is to store information acquired in virtue of that relation...; we can think of [that information] in terms, simply, of a list of predicates which the subject takes the referent to satisfy. The referent need not actually satisfy the predicates in question, since the subject may be mistaken. Such mistakes are possible because what determines the reference is not the content of the file but the relevant relation to the object” Recanati (2012, pp. 37-38).

Taking her cue from Fodor and Recanati, the mental file theorist could say that the labels on descriptive mental files can be accurately represented by definite descriptions, whereas the labels on nondescriptive mental files can't be accurately represented this way. Since it's these labels that feature as constituents of the proposition being entertained, we may propose that *de re* propositions have mental names as constituents, but *de dicto* propositions have concepts (i.e. the ones we'd represent with definite descriptions) as constituents. Of course, she will clarify that the previous use of 'mental name' is metaphorical: names are linguistic entities with semantic content, but the constituents of propositions are non-linguistic, and do not have content.

This solution concedes too much, for it abandons the original proposal, which was that *nondescriptive mental files* are the constituents of *de re* thoughts. Now, the claim is that the 'names' of these files are the constituents of *de re* thoughts. The lessons we should take from this are that all three responses I've considered to Goodman's argument have failed, and, pending further responses (e.g. one along the lines suggested in fn 200), we should deny that mental files are the constituents of (*de re*) propositions. Nevertheless, the most recent suggestion that 'file names' might be the constituents of thoughts (for our purposes, propositions) was suggestive. A satisfactory exploration of the alternative to which I'm drawn would require (at least) another chapter; so I'll close this section with just a brief sketch, acknowledging up front that there are several controversial claims in the following two paragraphs, a defense for which is (presently) lacking.

If there are mental files, then they function as devices for storing and organizing thoughts about objects, but they are not modes of presentations of those objects, and they are not constituents of propositions. If a sentence contains a name, and expresses a *de re* thought/proposition, then the content of the name is a non-descriptive concept. But this concept is simple, and any attempt to substitute for it some other concept leaves us with a different thought.²⁰² They are, as described in Losada (2015) *plain concepts*. These concepts are modes of presentations of their objects, hence there can be distinct concepts that share the same referent. (One need not know that more than one of his concepts share a referent). It may be that beliefs or thoughts about the objects of these

²⁰² When I say that these concepts are simple, I should not be taken to mean that they primitively represent their objects. Instead, I mean that the concept is unanalyzable: it's not clear what would be the 'parts' or 'constituents' of such a concept—probably not mental images, memories of sounds, etc. see Addis (1989, pp. 62-63) and Thomas (2019, section 3.3)—and we should not say that the concept holds 'contents', or else we've come full-circle to the mental file picture, and the problems it faces.

concepts are grouped together in mental files, but it's the plain concept itself which is the content of (a use of) the corresponding name, and which features as a constituent in the expressed proposition.

My suspicion is that most of our thoughts about objects are *de re*, and it's only in uncommon or contrived cases where one entertains a *de dicto* thought about something. This leads me to a very liberal view on the criteria for *de re* thought, which enjoys few supporters. Consider the following remark from Jeshion (2002):

[T]he Julius case [in which a descriptive name is introduced into a language by stipulation that 'Julius' refers to whoever ...] and cases like it involving "free" introduction of names into the language inspire skepticism among Millians. After all, the examples suggest that we can create *de re* beliefs at will, simply by stipulating: 'N' is the F. Evans's oft quoted remark—"We do not get ourselves into new belief states 'by the stroke of a pen'" ...—simply by introducing a name into the language—borders on a platitude. (Jeshion, 2002, p. 63).

I am skeptical of this platitudinous contention. When it comes to the conditions for *de re* belief, I'm led to think that one *can* introduce names (i.e. names with non-descriptive content) into a language in the way Evans describes (viz. by stipulating "let 'N.N.' refer to whoever is the F"). Hence, to enjoy a *de re* thought, one need only introduce a name into his or her language without satisfying any acquaintance or significance criterion. This bold contention demands some support:

As mentioned earlier, the major rivals to my preferred view are *the significance condition* (Jeshion) and *the acquaintance condition* (most everyone else, inspired by Russell) on *de re* thought. I reject the significance condition for the following reason: it seems to me that I can entertain *de re* thoughts about things which are not significant to me (i.e. which do not satisfy Jeshion's criteria for significance). I can entertain a thought about *this doorknob* to my right, *this piece of acrylic* on my desk, etc. But it's absurd to say that a doorknob, or piece of acrylic is significant to me with respect to my plans, affective states, or motivations (see Jeshion's *Significance Condition* in Jeshion, 2009, p. 394.) One could adopt a more liberal criterion for significance, such that my intention to use the doorknob or acrylic as an example makes them significant to me. But this strikes me as a low bar for significance, and is just as liberal as the view which I endorse.

Acquaintance accounts fare no better: as we've already seen, my thoughts about Feynman are *de re*, since there's no descriptive concept represented by an expression of the form *the F* such that I believe that Feynman is the F and "Feynman is *the F*" expresses a trivial, necessary truth. Nevertheless, I know very little about Feynman beyond that he was a famous physicist, and that Kripke used him as an example in the lectures which would become *Naming and Necessity*. Have I met the conditions for acquaintance with Feynman? It's hard to think that the correct answer is "yes", lest acquaintance be remarkably easy to secure. I answer that I'm *not* acquainted with Feynman, so acquaintance is not necessary for *de re* thought.

The above arguments suggest to me that neither of the two most popular accounts of the conditions for *de re* thought are successful. What's more, they also suggest that *de re* thought is remarkably easy to secure. We can reach the same point by considering (I) again (from section 4.1.2). Suppose I say, "Let's just use the name 'Brock' to refer to the oldest living person in China". Now consider (14):

(14) Brock is the oldest living person in China.

It's not clear to me that (14) expresses a trivial, necessary truth. That is, it's not clear to me that (14) is equivalent to:

(15) The oldest living person in China is the oldest living person in China.

It seems to me that we can fix the referent of "Brock" with a description, without conceding that the reference-fixing description is the content of "Brock". If I stipulate that "Brock" picks out *that person* (whoever he is) who's the oldest person in China, then I can coherently entertain all sorts of thoughts about that person, including the thought expressed by the sentence "Brock might not be the oldest living person in China" (he might've died just before I entertained the thought).²⁰³

²⁰³ Of course, I would not say that *all de re* thoughts are secured this way: I do not think that, for any *de re* thought, there is a name corresponding to the object of that thought, which we've introduced into our language by descriptive reference-fixing. That much is absurd. I only want to suggest that we *can* introduce names this way, and so make *de re* thought possible. But many *de re* thoughts are secured without introducing names. You might entertain *de re* thoughts about the tomato in front of you, but you needn't give the tomato a name. It seems to me that, in most cases, plain concepts of a thing are generated when we turn our attention to that thing. Unfortunately, this is not the place to expand on such a suggestion.

4.5 Summary of this Chapter's Argument

In this final chapter, I addressed the problem of singular propositions (viz. propositions the entertainment of which constitutes thinking truth-evaluable thoughts that are *directly about* an object). The (current) orthodoxy is that singular propositions have the entities they're about as constituents; to avoid confusion, and because the view I've defended entails that propositions don't have the entities they're about as constituents, I called (truth-evaluable) thoughts (or propositions) that are directly about their objects as '*de re*'. After proposing a test for *de re* thought, which addresses some confusion in the current literature (section 4.1), I argued that, contra singularists, *de re* thoughts are not object-dependent, and hence do not have their objects as constituents (section 4.2). Finally, I considered one way of understanding the modes of presentation that are constituents of *de re*—the mental file conception—and argued against it, before providing a brief sketch of my preferred understanding of modes of presentation.

4.6 Concluding Thoughts

As I've by now repeatedly noted, the goal of this dissertation has been to defend a very unpopular theory of propositional content—viz. one according to which token mental representations play the three most important propositional roles, including *being the primary bearers of truth values*, *the semantic contents of sentences*, and *the objects of propositional attitudes*. The first chapter defended a mentalist theory of content over non-mentalist rivals; the upshot of the discussion there was that the representational/alethic properties of linguistic expressions is properly analyzed in terms of the representational/alethic properties of mental states. In the second chapter, I argued that a nominalist theory according to which propositions are token mental representations enjoys serious advantages over some popular alternatives, not least because it allows us to attribute to propositions the three roles mentioned above, without conceding the mystery of how abstract objects represent mind-independently. Then, in chapter three, I contended that propositions are complexes of modes of presentation, and I addressed some questions about the unity of the proposition by criticizing the solution offered by Soames and Hanks, and arguing instead that propositional constituents are held together by an unanalyzed (albeit not necessarily *unanalyzable*) relation. Finally, in chapter four, I criticized the popular singularist view, which says that propositions have the entities they're about as constituents; while I said more in defense of the

view that the contents of *de re* thoughts never include the entities they're about, I did not have much to say about what the non-descriptive modes of presentation which are the contents of some names are like. Instead, I criticized an attractive option which proposes that the contents of these names are mental files. The upshot of the arguments across these chapters is that the theory of propositions I'm defending is, if not true, undeservedly overlooked.

It goes without saying (though I will say it anyway) that much, much more needs to be said to mount a formidable defense of this dissertation's thesis. Limitations both in time and ability (hopefully the latter because of the former) have compelled me to focus on just the issues that have come up in these four chapters. Several issues that I had not anticipated earlier arose along the way, and some which preoccupied me at the start turned out to be just distractions. If I had no shortage of time, I would find a place for all those issues which dawned on me too late in the project to give fair treatment. In another possible world, I would begin this project with a chapter on representation, and argue for that position which I merely assumed throughout this project—viz. that representational properties are first-and-foremost properties of mental things, and only derivatively of non-mental ones. I say *a bit* in support of this in chapter 1, but even there I veer close to stipulation, and even closer to an appeal-to-authority. (That position struck me as obvious at the start of this project, less so as I came to appreciate the difficulty of producing a satisfying argument for it.) Another early chapter would defend another assumption that appeared in the current form of this dissertation—viz. that a propositional theory of content is correct. There is already a good deal of work which I've cited in previous chapters in support of this view, but the arguments I found in Wettstein (1986 and 2004) have convinced me that, if nothing else, more serious engagement is needed with Wittgensteinian use-theories of meaning. I found both fascinating and disturbingly compelling Wettstein's observation that unfiltered reflection on linguistic practice don't compel us to introduce further levels of representation beyond linguistic ones. This (in my estimation) deserves more extended treatment than I was able to provide in my first chapter.

Also missing from these chapters is engagement with cognitive science. A robust defense of the thesis of this dissertation, since it proposes to explain what mental representations are like, cannot do without interacting with the latest, and most promising theories about what these representations are like. Armchair philosophizing can only get us so far, and I am very aware that we haven't travelled too far. Again, the magnitude of such a task (in particular, if one wants to do

it well), coupled with the short time-frame that I carved for myself to complete this project, were important motivators in my decision to leave these important pieces for future work. Instead, I tried not to overstep my bounds, especially in chapter three by punting certain questions toward cognitive scientists without making claims about what the mental representations in question *really are like*.

Finally, I did not discuss some questions which I find extraordinarily difficult, with respect to which I would need a long, long time to come to an intelligible position. I do not know what to say about disjunctive propositions, such as the one expressed by propositions with quantifiers—what sort of mental representation does one entertain when s/he thinks, for example, that “Purdue University exists”? What about propositional functions, or disjunctive propositions? What does it mean to represent things as being such that $1 + 1 = 2$? I consoled myself throughout this project by noting that these problems are not *uniquely* mine, but they are problems all the same.

4.7 References

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